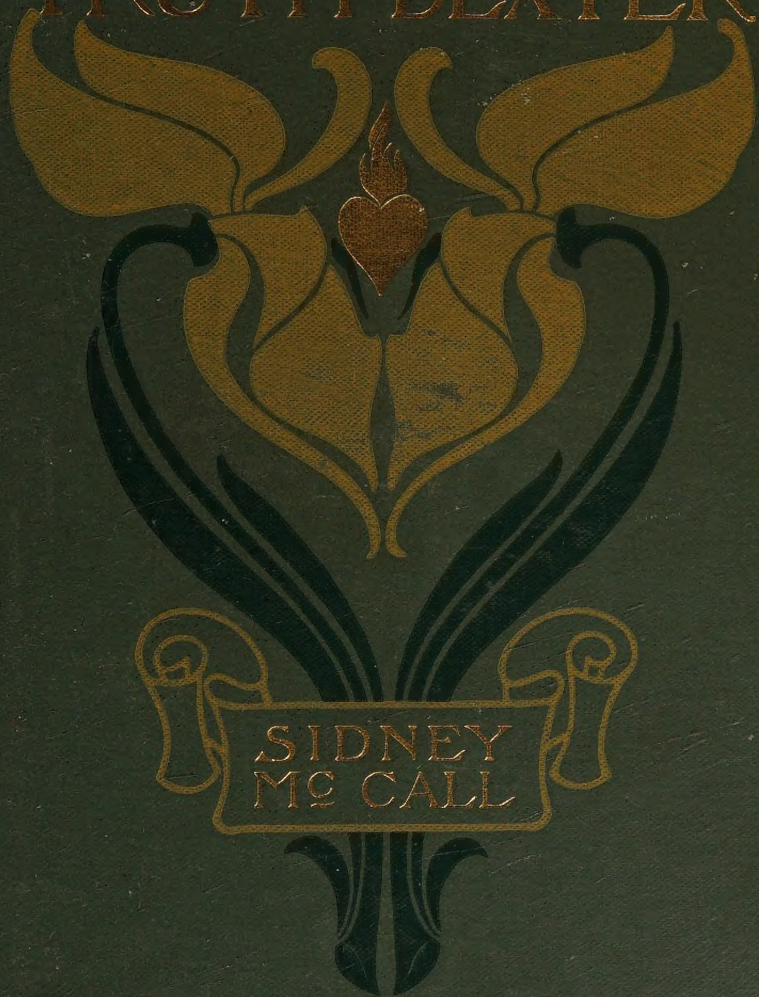


TRUTH · DEXTER



SIDNEY
MC CALL

From Mother -

Christmas 1902 -

Truth Dexter

Truth Dexter

By
SIDNEY McCALL



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FOREWORD

THE novel, "Truth Dexter," was composed substantially as at present published, during the year 1897. The time chosen for its action was the close of President Cleveland's second administration. The conversations of the middle chapters, with Lord Gayrock, embody opinions which were already strongly felt by the author before the war with Spain and more recent complications in the East made some of them appear strikingly prophetic. Though the whole work has since undergone much revision in detail, it has been thought best to leave the political discussion in its original form; for any attempt to strengthen the arguments of Craighead by reference to the exciting events of the last three years could only have obscured the action of the story. The author prefers the book to remain a picture of feelings and relations really subsisting between North and South just before that crisis in our history which brought the two sections, let us hope forever, into a common enthusiasm for a common national cause.

SIDNEY McCALL.

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Truth Dexter

CHAPTER I

THE BRASS BUDDHA GRINS

"Oh, you're going away, on business, to the South! That will mend matters. Gossip, likely enough, will forget all about us before you return. There's always something happening."

With a little exaggerated sigh of relief, she threw herself back among the gilt-embroidered cushions. "When do you start?"

Her visitor, a stern and handsome man of about thirty-five, seemed to resent a situation which gave his departure such suspicious interest. He turned his face until it showed a sharp profile, and fixed his gaze upon a fat, hybrid Buddha of new brass, which squatted in an opposite corner. Without changing this attitude he answered:—

"Orchid, you are too clever to think that I am to be treated like a school-boy. My stay may include but a very few days. The issue you affect to raise is in no way settled by my trip. I insist upon knowing just what you mean by this ambiguous plea."

A pair of long eyes glinted narrowly at him across the divan. They had the effect of green sea-water over gray rock. Craighead was aware of the look, but made no sign. At length, feeling that the constrained silence was becoming ridiculous, he turned. The mysterious eyes fell quickly, but not before he had caught their sparkle of excitement. He rose, as if stung into motion, but she took no notice of his tentative farewell; and he stood, hesitant for a moment, with angry eyes upon her.

"I insist upon an answer, Mrs. Wiley!"

"Don't stand there glowering," she cried. "You are not an executioner — yet. Let us talk it over rationally."

"To think of reasoning with a woman would be a paradox," he retorted.

"With most women, perhaps. But remember what a teacher in logic I've had."

He reseated himself, unwillingly. She laughed, then, with a sudden impulsive gesture, leaned forward, and raised to him a bewitching, pleading face.

"You don't want to get me talked about, now, do you, Van?"

Craighead regarded her. "I am not prepared to say that I do not. Have I done anything to deserve it? If so, you must have foreseen that possibility when you insisted upon my visits."

"Adam!" she exclaimed. "The woman tempted me —! I loathe Adam. Can the nineteenth century produce no deeper chivalry?"

Craighead lifted his eyes again. — "That's the modern woman in a nutshell! She claims everything that belongs by right to man, all of his privileges and most of his vices; yet, when consequences threaten, she clamors for his chivalry and protection. It's time for men to bring this farce to an end."

Orchid threw back her head with a laugh that shook off his reproof like drops of bright dew.

"Evidently it would be time wasted to look for those lofty sentiments in one Van der Weyde Craighead. But if you don't care whether I'm talked about or not, that makes it all the more necessary for me to look out for myself. Don't you see?"

Her listener scowled, but did not reply.

"Who's not answering now?" she cried, with the same good-humored brightness. "Don't look so cross! You couldn't possibly think, Van dear, that I would be willing to give you up altogether!"

She nestled back slowly among her favorite cushions, and waited. A coil of burning incense wrote gray hieroglyphics upon the silence of the room. Above her hung a great carved ostrich egg, and, near it, a Venetian lamp of fretted iron-work. It was a strange, rich, luminous room, set about with oriental treasures in unexpected patches of pure color, like a brilliant unorganized mind, that draws into itself refulgent images, which it has no power to co-ordinate.

Usually oblivious of such externals, Craighead felt at this instant a sort of impatient distaste for so mongrel an assortment of treasures. The gay colors jarred upon him; the many individual claims for notice annoyed; the fat Buddha became a personal enemy; and in the midst of all lay Orchid, the unsettled spirit, the unadjusted instinct of the whole.

He remembered how, from boyhood, he had inveighed against married belles, and thought the men who encouraged such abnormal social phenomena even more contemptible than the weak creations of their weakness. On leaving Harvard for city life, he would have scorned the suggestion of temptation from such a quarter. But sometimes armor may be worn thin by over-polishing.

When the young lawyer's first success, the speech in court which filled the local papers with head-lines, had caused him, after the manner of such things, to be bidden about to teas and receptions, he found the lionizing by no means unpleasant. He thought of flattery as wine, and consciously steadied himself after each new bumper. At one of the gatherings a summons was brought him from Mrs. Wiley, the reigning belle of the Boston season. He was, at the moment, in a quiet corner, bending over a flower-faced girl. The interruption was unwelcomed, and he followed his friend with obvious reluctance. Bowing stiffly to Mrs. Wiley, his raised head encountered two wonderful, merry green eyes, which seemed to say, "Don't think that *I* intend to flatter you, young man."

After a few moments' sparkling conversation, made up on her part of exquisitely keen rapier thrusts into his recently inflated self-esteem, and on his of sarcastic but very inadequate repartee, he turned away, the bloom of his vanity tarnished, but his blood rather quicker of beat. He sought again the flower-faced girl, but her innocent chatter was strangely flatted to his ear.

He and Mrs. Wiley had their second meeting a few evenings later. He looked at her with veiled hostility, resenting the laws of polite deportment that demand recognition for recognition. She brushed past him with as little concern as if he had been a potted plant. He colored, and turned to the door, but, an instant after, wheeled about again, and began a deliberate search for the friend (his junior partner) who had first presented him.

"Come and introduce me to Mrs. Wiley, Norton."

Norton stared for a moment, speechless, then his wide mouth grew suddenly wider. "Oh, I see! She's cut you!" he cried in evident delight. "Don't take it hard, old man. It's only one of her little ways."

Craighead muttered something about not caring a—unit unknown to the metric system—about her little ways, as Norton hurried him toward the cruel charmer.

"Oh, Mr. Craighill, of course! How *could* I have forgotten! Why, it was you, was it not, who wrote that splendid article in the last 'Pedantic' upon the occult influence of Mars?"

Craighead paled with rage.

"Oh, never mind!" laughed his tormentor. "I see I must have mistaken the article. You've done something fetching, I'm sure. But come down to earth now, and take me to get a glass of punch. I'm perishing!"

From an alcove Norton watched their slow progress through the crowded rooms. In his eyes was humor, and something of genuine pity. "Poor old Van! He's old and stiff for his years. It will go hard with him."

And it did go hard with him ; no man can know how hard who has not found his own vaunted racecourse quicksand. Doubtless it was the initial sting that spurred his pride to undertake revenge. This was the first woman who had challenged his interest with a blow. A more accomplished "society man" would have appreciated the clever ruse at first glance, but Craighead had hitherto affected to disdain "society." The modern Achilles has more weak spots than heels, and of them masculine vanity is most accessible. So it transpired that Craighead became yet another victim for the insatiable Mrs. Wiley, carrying his throat haughtily, and continuing to believe himself invincible.

The result to him of the friendship had been a series of intellectual surprises, which continued to furnish fresh pique to his curiosity. Mrs. Wiley had thrown herself fearlessly into the most logical and masculine of his problems ; there meeting him, point for point, with a brilliancy and originality of suggestion that first astonished him, then charmed, and finally became a necessity. She never assumed the mastery, but, sometimes turning as if weary of impersonal discussion, would speak in a hushed voice of the utter impossibility of having the best part of one's self understood. Little by little he had come to feel that he alone was her true friend, her intellectual companion, her accepted teacher.

Nevertheless there were moments when, as now, his hard New England common sense forced him into viewing himself as with another man's eyes, and he winced under the apparition. There was an odor as of drugs about the whole situation. He seemed to have been betrayed in the very citadel of his strength ; as if he were a Samson, who had waked in time to feel the cold touch of the shears. It was not so much the ghost of his boyish ideals, as the danger alarm ringing through the last moments of a dream, that now haunted him. With all her frankness Orchid had ever remained elusive, a mystery, a

Protean problem. But he had never, until this moment, suspected that the solution lay in the fact of his being a mere dupe. A revulsion of feeling against her was strong.

Weary of returning his heavy gaze, Orchid had closed her eyes; and now, with one flushed cheek against a velvet cushion, was breathing as if asleep, with the soft, fragrant rhythm of an infant.

"Have you a heart at all?" asked the man slowly, in a low voice, as if not expecting to be answered. She looked up with a little start and shiver.

"A — a — heart!" she echoed. A strange light sank to the depths of her wonderful eyes and lay clinging to the gray rock. Her nostrils quivered.

"Perhaps I've been spared a heart. I've been told so." She paused, and drew in a long breath. "But I have other things; an intellect, for instance; a soul, I think; and — a — *tiger* whose chains are wearing thin."

No one could have told whether her listener were moved or unmoved. She flashed one keen look across his face, then leaned back and again closed her eyes.

"If I thought — if I believed — that you were capable of a feeling so intense that you feared it, I should honor you," he said at length. "But that is not your reason. You were frank enough at first. You quoted some infernal old woman —"

"My mother," she murmured.

"Oh, yes, I beg your pardon, I'm sure. They are all alike, though." He was not to be turned from his purpose. "You said —"

"Never mind what I said, Van. You're not a phonograph."

He took no notice of her flippant remark, but went on steadily, as if pursuing his own thoughts.

"I could easily bear the loss of your friendship —"

"Oh, thank you!" she interpolated.

"— but, strangely enough, it is the loss of an ideal that

I feel most keenly ; of an ideal which I cannot exactly say that I had, but which I hoped for, in you."

"That is, indeed, pathetic," came from the cushions.

"Orchid, don't force me to despise you! Surely you have enough that is genuine in you to wish to leave to an old friend what glamor of fancy the situation affords. For I shall not accept your weak compromise. I am not to be waved aside and beckoned back at will. This means — the end."

She caught her breath slightly, and made as if to rise, but his face and tone had a sort of relentless monotony that checked her. She shrugged one shoulder and shrank back.

"I shall not pretend that it comes without a shock. The awakening is not pleasant, though perhaps salutary. What I have cared most for in you was your possibility of greatness ; with this belief gone, little is left to regret."

Orchid gave an insulting little laugh, and began humming an air from *Carmen* under her breath.

Craighead faced her squarely. "You will have other dupes left, of course," he said bitterly ; "but how much interest have they in all that is best and deepest in your nature? It is amusement for them to watch your steady degeneration. I alone at times have suffered, and, at times, dared to remonstrate. Is it not enough to have undermined my faith, without forcing me to believe that you gloat over the disillusion?"

Orchid gazed upon him from under level eyelids, and in well-feigned admiration. She opened her lips, but before she could speak he had broken in —

"And you *are* great, — in strange, erratic flashes! This makes it all the harder to know that you will ruthlessly allow your nature to lapse into disintegration. Most women are hens, or else guinea-fowl; you might have been an eagle. It is this very prostitution of fineness, this cheapening of emotion, this contemptible twiddling of the nerves of the soul, that is the curse of our era. Are we a nation of men, — or of charlatans?"

Orchid laughed again, and this time the tone was one of honest merriment. "In New England, at least, you are a nation of women," she answered. "*We* set the standards; *we* run the newspapers, and make the laws. You men are simply our materials. And, Sir Scoffer, I would like to inform you that even at the bar of my own suspicious sex, I am accounted a thoroughly respectable young matron, a leader of society, a patroness of functions."

She held herself stiffly upright, in exaggerated hauteur, and gave a mocking laugh. He did not reply at once, and she sat, slenderly erect, swaying a little from side to side, and smiling.

In spite of the irritation produced by Van's words, and the anger now well under control, she was both interested and excited. Van was revealing himself in a new rôle, and anything new was a boon. In his very denunciation she felt herself expanding. It was strange flattery, this unexpected tribute from so reserved a nature, to her charm, her power, her possibilities. She realized, too, that it was the crisis of their friendship, a moment of exaltation, or of dissolution. She must not deceive herself by underestimating the impersonality of his coldness. Yet, on the other hand, her admiration for him in this mood of relentless decision and analysis swung her out into currents deeper and more dangerous than any pity for a pleading lover could have done. She had always loved danger. She felt the swift coming of it now.

"Well," she cried, "do you challenge my last assertion?"

"Heaven forbid!" he answered suddenly. "Not for a moment would I think of imputing to you what society calls blame. You have been clever enough not to offend any of its sacred laws. Nobody, but a few deadly old maids, could find fault with you for making a decorous use of the freedom your good husband allows. That's not it. The social standard itself is to blame. It's too narrow. It draws the line in the wrong place. It can't distinguish

a hypocrite from a heroine. I have not, as yet, made any deep investigation into such problems, — social well-being *versus* the right of individual development; but, in your case, at least, I declare to you solemnly that I believe you would be a nobler woman, though you defied the world openly for the sake of one great love, than, secure in conventions which no really great soul could tolerate, to continue, as now, drawing nutriment for your vanity, from the decay of men's ideals. You drink of homage, as old Omar did of wine. You would dissolve our characters in your caprice, as Cleopatra did pearls. And your reckoning will be equally mournful."

He paused, drew a long breath, and then turned to gaze with deliberate sadness, rather than scrutiny, into the charming, defiant face before him. She looked at him hard and long, as if trying to overcome, by sheer feminine magnetism, his ugly skirmish-line of prophecies and criticism. But the solemn dignity of the visitor's expression did not alter. With eyes still on his, she leaned nearer, arched her throat as if for a strike, and asked derisively: "With whom do you propose that I shall elope, in order to demonstrate my greatness, — Cyril Bole? Quincy? or, perhaps, — yourself?"

"Pardon me, but I do not aspire to the honor."

The red in Orchid's cheek vanished; a slight pallor took its place. She covered her eyes with both hands, and Van could see that she was shaking with some suppressed emotion. What was it, — anger? — laughter? — tears? He sat watching her as one might watch a beautiful, half-tamed forest captive. At length her strained breathing gave way to unmistakable sobs. The jewels on her fingers seemed to detach themselves, one by one, and fall into her lap. They were tears.

Van felt decidedly uncomfortable, and bent his stiff head. "Orchid, if I was too harsh, — if I hurt you, forgive me."

"Ah, yes, you hurt," she whispered piteously. "You do

not dream how much. But I thank you. I see it all now. It is n't too late. Tell me, what can I do?"

"God knows! You've gone too far."

"But suppose I did love,—loved a man enough to defy the world for him. Suppose — I loved — *you!*"

Craighead's glance might have smitten water from a rock. "Suppose I should not believe you, though you swore it!"

Her pallor deepened. She shivered a little, but her answer flew more swiftly than his taunt.

"But you shall believe me! You do believe me! Ah ——"

The effort seemed to overcome her. Her head drooped. He could see that she was trembling. The sudden expansion of the problem made him dizzy. Its fascinations grew iridescent, like the colors of a great bubble blown by Fate.

"This rivals Madame Bernhardt," he forced himself to say. She had not seen how the dream of a dream had, momentarily, softened his rigid profile.

"Oh, Van, that was cruel, — unworthy of you!" The harp-tones of her voice faltered. "Now that you have conquered, be generous! Perhaps I have been acting, all along, — until now, but it has been to deceive, not you, but my own heart. It is n't too late! Can't you see, — can't you *feel* that I, — Oh, Van —" She threw her arms out wildly. He caught her wrists. There was a gleam, as of triumph, on his face.

"You do not love me!" he said in a terrible voice. "I know you better than you know yourself. This is a mere paroxysm, a revelry in sensation." She struggled a little in his rough grasp. "God knows I want to believe you. But to swear it is not enough. How are you going to make me believe?"

"It is true! I swear it! Let my arms go, — you hurt me."

He almost threw down her wrists, into whose white

circles the pink blood darted. He had the advantage, and meant to keep it.

"Would you be willing to give me proof of this before the world?"

"Yes, Van, — but —"

"No evasions! Answer me on your soul, — before Heaven! Since you've gone this far, I *will* know. This must be the ultimate, irrevocable test."

All at once he felt himself possessed by that rage for certainty — for acquisition — which may belong as well to the scientist as to the lover; to the religious fanatic, as to the slayer of wild beasts. She had stung the inmost fibre of that on which he most prided himself, his judgment of human character. This time the test included judgment of himself also. Her possible sufferings did not even occur to him. The savage — or was it the scientist? — was uppermost.

"Do you hear? Answer me, Orchid! Were I to demand it, could you swear to defy the world for my sake, to give up home, friends, wealth, honor? If I ask it, I say, can you — will you — swear this to me?"

"I will." Her voice was a muffled beating of wings.

"Then you shall be put to the test." He sprang to his feet, and looked down at her, trembling and glittering among the bright cushions. Was she a tigress at bay, or about to yield and fawn? In either case she was supremely beautiful. He suddenly became aware that the crisis of his own self-test was upon him. For a thousand reasons he must have her secret. A desire to seize her, to kiss her, to crush her until she screamed, startled him with its sudden intensity. He had never allowed himself to think of her as a lover. It was no part of his purpose to become one now. If he yielded to a mere impulse of tenderness, his power to test her would be gone forever; and she might gain supremacy. He mastered himself, and said coolly, but more kindly: —

"Do not think that I would take a low or unworthy

advantage of this concession, Orchid. I appreciate fully what it means to a woman in your position. I shall consider carefully all the conditions before requiring the fulfilment of your oath. But —" here again his eyes took fire — "as sure as there is a —"

At this moment a heavy step and a cheery voice sounded in the outer hallway. The brass rings of the portière hissed to one side, and Mr. Thomas C. Wiley entered his wife's boudoir. As he met the excited faces before him, he stopped, and his countenance gathered a foolish look, which was followed by a flush. Orchid gave a little cry, as of relief, and sped toward him.

"Oh, Tom," she panted, "you are only just in time! Van — Van is asking me to run away."

The room was filled with that sort of intensified silence that follows an explosion. In the sudden photographic sensitiveness to detail of Van's eye the brass Buddha distinctly appeared to grin. Tom looked from one to the other with an expression such as an honest cow might wear, if offered a wisp of green paper instead of grass. Then, breaking into a forced, chuckling laugh, he cried, "Wants you to elope, does he? Well, that's a good joke!"

Orchid's answering laugh was a bit hysterical. She retained her hold of Tom's hand as she replied: —

"Yes, is n't it? That's what we thought. Why are you so late, dear?"

Van could never afterward quite recollect how he got away. Tom had certainly given his hand a painful squeeze. There was a vague impression of falling over footstools and of hearing something crash. A vision of Orchid smiling, with Tom's hand on her shoulder, was framed, like the *dénouement* of a tragedy, in red fire. He had seemed forced into the rôle of baffled villain, slinking away from the suspicious glances of the footmen, the pedestrians in the snowy streets, and the shapeless mass of passengers in the over-loaded street-cars.

An hour later, while sullenly ramming shirts and things into a dressing-case, a blue note was handed him. It exhaled an essence of orchids and of incense. He tore it open, and his mouth went awry in an ugly smile as he read the unsigned words, —

“When you come from the South.”

CHAPTER II

OVER THE RUBICON

THE next morning Mr. Van der Weyde Craighead awoke with dust in his nostrils. A grimy landscape, visible from the car windows, streamed backwards as if in flight of terror at some catastrophe ahead. He was still among the big cities of the Northeast, where he could be sure of morning papers. Of these he bought a supply sufficient for the inauguration of a news-stand, and skimmed through the lot with increasing disgust. Babble, scandal, and personalities! Even the political discussions sounded like thinly veiled squabbles between gamblers. An obscure corner, packed with short cable messages, held all the European news.

"What the deuce do I care about Rudyard Kipling's squabbles?" he growled, as he tossed the last crackling sheet toward a vibrating pyramid on the opposite cushion.

From a window of the smoking-car he stared out upon a world scarcely less mean and inadequate than that depicted by the daily press. The bare, pathetic villages; the rubbish heaps of gloomy foundries; the flat-faced station shops with half-emptied candy-jars, drying lemons, cigarette packages, and plugs of tobacco jammed close against the glass panes of the one dirty window; the mammoth advertisement signs that broke the monotonous checks of farms; the flat, coarse roads smirking out over bare hills or stump-dotted plains,—all combined to oppress him with a sense of dreary hopelessness. Occasional glimpses of Chesapeake Bay, bluer for the setting of tinted smoke from the engine, came like refreshing draughts.

Between eight and nine, the dome of the Capitol at Washington suddenly rose and hung, like a huge white

bubble, floating over a sea of uncertain grays. The novel spectacle — Craighead had never been so far South before — carried him sheer through painfully haunting thoughts of Boston, into deeper strata of fancy, where he was surprised to catch ambition already laying the corner-stone of a parliamentary career. Strolling during the half-hour wait into Pennsylvania Avenue, he caught that first inspiring vista of ample lines, down whose convergence so many legions of mad votaries have been swept to the many-teraced, many-pillared Pantheon of Power, which glitters against the sky like a vast, carved iceberg.

As the train slowly drew out over the Potomac, he felt that he was crossing a kind of Rubicon. This had been the frontier of that strange South he was now invading, where red-hot rebels still scowled on Yankee "Carpet-Baggers," and long-haired, lantern-jawed, ill-clad men, with pistols and knives bulging in scanty concealment, slouched in waiting for a congenial duelling fracas, or the delights of an opportune lynching. Yonder among the hills must lie the mansion of General Robert Lee, proud and lonely, as its owner's career in history. He pictured to himself the sentried regiments, the smoke of crowding transports, the mighty bustle of armed legions that had trodden these reedy shores to mud, only a generation ago. Miles of dilatory freight cars soon shut out the view.

Craighead now resolutely drew himself together, and focussed his energies upon what he knew to be his own battle for the day. There were no more distracting sights to excuse procrastination.

He was like a general who surveys a fatal field the morning after a rapid but decisive skirmish. What a situation for a cool-headed lawyer, a scorner of feminine charms! How had it all happened? And where had he made mistakes? And was he now a fugitive, or a prisoner?

Van did not spare himself. It was one of his characteristics, one that was making him noted at the bar, to be

able to sit in court-martial upon himself. He willed to recollect with painful minuteness every word, tone, and gesture of the preceding evening. He took out a note-book and began to jot down points. He liked to range facts and probabilities in clear and separate order, like a dentist's glittering tools under the very eyes of a victim; and he now felt some cold exultation in a duality of emotions that rendered such an operation possible.

The jauntily patronizing negro porter, and the few passengers, mostly Southerners, dotted about the sleeper, cast inquisitive glances toward the stiff bronze head in the end section.

"Would n't you prefah that I should bring you a tabul, sah?"

Van motioned dissent with one impatient hand.

It had been a catastrophe, — a sunken rock which, at the end of a long cruise, had split his frail pleasure yacht! He pursued a disjointed soliloquy.

"I was to make my visits less frequent, was I? She gave the suggestion as coolly as if telling her maid to be more circumspect with the corner policeman. Wiley had urged me to come often: he knows that I am incapable of taking advantage of his confidence. Perhaps it was n't genuine! She wanted to stir me up to something; and she succeeded, for I got mad."

He was "mad" still.

"I saw that I was in danger of becoming her dupe, and I told her so. She flatters each fool with his own weakness. Sonnets with Cyril Bole! Politics with old Hovey Dodge! Theosophy with that heathen Swami, Gunga Deen! Astrology with Wallery Bickering! I declare it's enough to make an honest calf ill. Even an infant like Quincy is not allowed to go free; she talks football and yacht-races to him in a voice Circe might have used in discoursing upon apple-parings with a favorite swine! I verily believe that I am the only man with whom she has allowed herself the luxury of being sincere."

He was not scowling now. What would have been a smile in other eyes merely unbent his determined brows.

"And I succeeded in arousing her better than I intended. She was angry at first. By Jove! How she glitters when she is angry! Then she became thoughtful, — then sad, — then eager — and then — she touched off the powder-magazine!"

He dashed his pencil across the sheet with a force that tore it; but his face flushed rather than hardened. For him, hypocrisies and illusions had been blown to pieces. How about her? Yes, for her also! But a horde of new ones had rushed in, seven times more dangerous! At the moment he had believed it a sudden impulse on her part; now he weighed a suspicion of deep design. In the end it all came to this, — he had been willing to withdraw, but she would not release him, and, to accomplish her purpose, had sprung upon him a man's utmost temptation. Was it passion, or strategy?

He had accused her bitterly of the latter. Why had he forced her oath, rather than flee when the danger sounded? Professional curiosity? No! Pique? No! He had been dazzled by her, — no use to disguise it, — he had played with the dream of fire! Of course he had meant nothing. He meant nothing now. But it would be harder now to give her up! Confound her! Why had she forced this issue? It was a tactical error.

"There is only one course open," he said half aloud, — "to drop her!"

He shut his note-book with a snap, and thrust it into a side pocket. His fingers touched the satin smoothness of a letter. He withdrew them as if burned, and his face grew hard.

The letter! What had she meant by it? To atone for the insult, of course, — for his humiliation before Tom.

"I'll not let that pass," he muttered darkly. "She shall confess her duplicity, or — or — I'll throw back her love

in her teeth!" He thought his sudden desire to believe that she loved him due to the opportunity it would give him for revenge.

"When you come from the South!"

How she would be smiling to herself in the interval, and concocting plots against the tame lion's return! What might he sink to, if he went back meekly! No, a thousand times, No! Let him have it out with her now! He must shatter the chance defence that Tom's sudden apparition had granted her. Let her know that she must cut herself off at once, or yield absolutely. He must have that test she had sworn to give. Each instant of delay both knew to be her gain.

"Last call for luncheon!"

When Van returned and settled himself into the corner of the red velvet seat, his attention was attracted to a family group half-way down the vista of the car. A mother, still young and girlish in appearance, was reading aloud to her little son, a lad of about ten years. The child's curly head was against the mother's shoulder, and one somewhat grimy set of little fingers peeped around the collar of her neat travelling cloak. A humorous passage soon set them off into a common peal of laughter. The book was not resumed; but a prolonged and animated dialogue seemed to be no less entertaining to both.

Craighead's restless thoughts now led him back, half unwillingly, into a review of his own life. The novelty of this open Southern affection vaguely stirred him with its contrast. His own childhood had known little of feminine endearment. His mother, a worthy, hard-faced Puritan, died when he was a mere boy, leaving memories of rigid insistence upon small duties. His aunts, volumes of the same Calvinistic sermons bound in slightly different thicknesses of leather, betrayed a similar antagonism to the claims of tenderness and forbearance. He had regarded with pitying scorn some female cousins who once made eyes at him.

His father, a capitalist in a manufacturing community, was also a New Englander, but less narrow; perhaps because an ancestor, reaping gold from his farm in early days, had married into a famous New York family, and elected to remain a peer among fashionable Gothamites. But the sole offspring of this surprising union had returned, after his parents' death, to his senses and Massachusetts, where a later Craighead had run off the remnants of old Dutch hoards into bright, newly-patented machinery.

The train now stopped at a little town in Southern Virginia. Craighead saw the outline of a square brick factory, and read the name, painted over the lower windows in white, "Piedmont Cotton Mills." His poor father's recent struggle for manufacturing supremacy spoke clear to him from this menacing title. It was the South's tardy revenge for Yankee victories, to absorb the thrifty capital that had hitherto fattened in hyperborean arrogance upon her raw materials. Old Craighead had not been one to yield to the new conditions, and gradually spiders had set up mocking looms in his deserted factory windows.

As the train sped on, Craighead fell into a mood so introspective that it seemed to embrace his whole stock of reminiscences in a single rapid vision. It was but a momentary flash backward from his meeting with Orchid, to a burn in early childhood, which had scarred flesh and memory together; and as nimble a kinetoscopic return, through scenes of college days, to his one feminine friendship.

The two years in which he had known Orchid were, in all respects, the most important of his life. The glow of some unreal fantasy seemed to throw her up against the brightening background of his professional success. He felt that certain cold surfaces of his intellect had become mellow under her touch. He could not disentangle his growing versatility from the varied sparkle of her wit.

She had become an integral part of his work; as it were a third lobe of his brain.

How faded and tame were all other women beside her! Her face began to weave itself upon the gray woof of his reverie, — a clear oval outline, which at times seemed to glow with an unearthly radiance, as of a pink amethyst held against a star. The long green eyes looked again into his. In them the secrets of a jungle lay sleeping. Her eyebrows, delicate and almost level, were of jet, fine as if spun. The jewel-red lips, the pointed chin, the metallic, copper-gold hair; was ever a woman like this before? Then, the little white throat-stem that bore the brilliant flower of her face; the slight figure, too thin, perhaps, but held with fine spirit and alertness; the strange contrast to this alertness in her languorous, Eastern postures among her silken rugs; the slim arms; the ugly little hands half covered with jewels; the exquisite, tiny feet in their oriental slippers; the harp-like voice, the bewildering metamorphoses of her moods!

Ah! was it not possible, after all, that she had really loved him, and that his thoughts had done her a foul injustice? In that case he owed her no apology indeed, but to demand of her the test she had promised. He could honor her first for her decision, and then by the noble way in which he would renounce all claim over her. She would love him the more for his magnanimity. They might still meet occasionally on a higher plane.

He rang, on the impulse, for a table and paper, but before writing, took out once more the little blue note. With its perfume rose a vision of Tom's caress of Orchid. It stung him with a physical shock, as if the train had stopped. Detached fragments of his morning's reasoning stood up gaunt as charred ruins in a cold, gray light. Suspicion — that curse of his profession — came strong upon him, and he heard himself shout again:

"This is but a revelry of sensation!"

He must know! He must force her hand! With set

lips he spurred himself to do what he afterward recognized to be the most unlawyer-like of his acts. He wrote as follows:—

DEAR MRS. WILEY, — For reasons to be afterward explained I find I must demand at once verbal proof of a statement made by you to me last evening. Your answer must be given now, without circumlocution, and I shall act upon it at once. The issue cannot wait until my return. Upon receipt of this, wire me only one of the two words “yes” or “no.” I must earnestly request, in fact command, that there be no addition. I shall regard anything else as equivalent to “no.” If it be the latter, I shall accept it as a finality. If the former, I will write you further details and plans. Do nothing until you receive these. Professional secrecy is absolute.

Yours very truly,

E. VAN DER WEYDE CRAIGHEAD.

Address telegram c/o Col. John Dexter, Big House, Dexterville, Ala.

As he read over this letter with a final precautionary minuteness, he was conscious of a sort of pity; but this, like wintry sunshine passing through glass, left no warmth behind. His chief thought was for himself. He assured himself again and again that the answer would certainly be “no.” He thought that he wanted it to be so. He must at any cost rid himself of this burden of doubt and danger. He felt himself weak in considering Orchid’s probable feelings at all.

“Poor little woman,” he murmured once. “I feel like a botanist! Ought one to require that an orchid, with all its brilliant loveliness, should possess also a soul?” A faint smile was on his lips as he sealed, directed, and stamped the envelope.

When the next large station was reached, he left the car in order to mail the letter with his own hands. A draft of warm, sweet air, with a dash of spices in it, filled him with a sense of delicious novelty. A crowd of little negroes ran up with local papers. He read upon the upper

margin, "Charlotte, North Carolina." Making his way toward two large red boxes at the end of the station platform, marked "U. S. Mail," he opened the narrow lid of the further one, labelled, "Letters — North."

The missive in his hand appeared to have a volition of its own. He almost fancied that he felt it shrink from the receptacle. He held it half-raised, and turned, looking as far up the track as vision could reach. A warning whistle sounded; and an "all-aboard" from the conductor. With a spasm of decision he dropped it in, and the lid clanked harshly over it.

As he sped back to the sleeper he said to himself, —
"If the Potomac was not a Rubicon, this is!"

CHAPTER III

THE TRACK OF THE CENTIPEDE

CRAIGHEAD felt almost light and gay in the sudden relief from responsibility. His was a nature that could shut a valve, as it were, upon superfluous thoughts and after-anxieties, thus leaving clear passage for the flow of new impressions. The present hour, with its novel environment, assumed importance and reality. The sunlight now slanted in through the car windows opposite to him, for afternoon was well turned. He gazed out in unfeigned interest, observing minutely each detail of the scenes which hurried by.

The month was February, yet the air so warm that he was glad to open the window. From the earth came a cool, fragrant moisture that hinted of early frosts, so light that they would melt at the very breath of dawn. In a more northern climate such clemency in winter would have called forth a demonstration of emerald blades and pink leaflets, but here the woods showed only a purple network of bare branches, with infrequent dark lumps of pine and cedar. Underneath spread an endless soaked mass of gray and brown dead ferns. The strongest notes of color came from great red scars on the low hillsides, as if Time had rubbed away a scanty integument of neglected soil, and left a flayed earth.

Farms were few and mean. Bent ghosts of ancient corn-stalks chattered in the light breeze and seemed to hold out shrivelled arms toward the train. From the sight of white shreds clinging to rows of low, brown plants, Craighead inferred that here had been a cotton plantation. He thought he recognized tobacco stalks also. Thin,

straggling lines of depleted woods shrank to a safe distance, and hid themselves behind formless hills. In the west were purple hints of stately mountains, based upon richer forests of dark evergreen; but these held safely aloof. The railroad, as if it were the track of some poisonous creature, had withered its own path.

Sometimes among the uneasy slopes villages were spilled — spilled rather than set, — terminal moraines, so to speak, of prehistoric glacial movement in civilization, with no suggestion of unity except the dispersion in dejected radii of many red-clay wagon roads. Squat, gray negro log-huts, with outside mud chimneys, lay parallel to the car-track, and were often double, the two ends being apparently occupied by separate families; melancholy links between the sadness of the past and the spasmodic newness of the present. These houses had the air of barnacles, which, with their humble inhabitants, still cling to a stranded log. Sometimes they stood patiently soaking in muddy swamps, but oftener sat tipsily on the side of some scarred hill, as if drawn in false perspective. The pathetic, stump-dotted space of forest about each cabin marked it as a sort of funeral pyre of the rightful owners of the soil. Often at the front entrance would cluster the entire assembly of occupants, — babies, grandfathers, stout matrons, spiky-headed piccaninnies, — to laugh and gesticulate as the train sped by. At the rear of the house, suspended on ropes or dead-tree branches, invariably appeared portions of the family attire, faded pink calicoes, dingy undergarments, and red flannel shirts, the last throwing spots of vivid color into the sombre landscape.

Upon such crude panorama Craighead gazed, half in pity, half in contempt. His first impressions were decidedly against the South. Like many Northern boys, he had gathered prejudice from folios of "The War of the Rebellion," with spirited pictures of sleek Yankee regiments in the very act of overturning disreputable mobs of terror-

stricken "Johnnies." Later in life he had been taken by his father to various "love-feasts," where a "Reconstructed Union" was spelled out in colored lights against an ever-green background, and the gentlemen from Dixie referred to as "our dear, misguided bretheren." In private circles he had often heard them denounced as lazy, luxurious slave-owners, a corrupt class which it had been a virtue to extinguish. His father and mother had been abolitionists; and fireside tales, whispered over his childish head, had made him hold his breath in horror, and clench his little fists with the impulse of a young crusader.

But now the waste about him, contrasted with the snug farms of New England, seemed to take on the deeper gloom of a conquered land's decay, with much the same appearance as that of a Roman province, after the torch of the barbarian. The crass, prophetic prosperity set forth in Carolina's cotton factories had not percolated so far south as this. The occasional charred ruin of an extensive villa, never rebuilt, standing defiant in the midst of its tangled park, led him into picturing the devastating march of his quondam heroes. The villages showed little trace of a former refined aristocracy. The self-important loungers at the stations looked like New York politicians out on a very bad spree. No man ever stood firmly on his feet, evidently thinking that posts and walls were made to serve as props. Two figures in a doorway outlined a dejected "V."

A sudden illumination from the west turned the earth-wounds to dazzling scarlet, and the dead grass to golden fringe. The Asheville mountains tossed like waves of a molten sea.

After dinner Craighead took his cigar out on the rear platform of the smoker. The fragrant coolness of the evening seemed to possess a strange, intangible quality, as though impregnated with some fluid hitherto unknown. The stars hung large, and moist, and near, with something of human tenderness in their lambent regard. Upon the

shaking earth, out from under his feet, the track, stretching away to the North, crawled, with its transverse lines of gullies, stealthily in the dim light, like a veritable centipede.

Next morning he awoke amid the bustle of a large covered station. Hastily dressing, he stepped out among half a dozen shifting trains, marked "Savannah," "Chattanooga," "Memphis," and other less familiar names. The Florida Express for the North rolled in lazily.

"Yes," said the conductor, "we were detained about four hours at Spartanburg, and this is only Atlanta." A small boy, loaded with yellow missives, took Craighead's telegram for Colonel Dexter. Female negro officials, in neat white caps, were in waiting to minister to the needs of lady passengers and children.

The badly served breakfast at an end, and the train once more on its way, Craighead turned from the allurements of Georgian scenery to consideration of the business which had brought him to the South. He took out from his hand-bag a small leather case, brass bound, and carefully locked. This he opened, and from it drew a package of documents, held together by a rubber band. The full significance of these papers had never before been so clear. His smile deepened as he read. What sort of people were these who had already refused with indignation the offer he was coming to repeat? Judge Adams had warned him of the delicacy of the mission. "It is a nest of rebels, — red-hot ones at that!" the Judge had said. "You may get lynched, you know."

Craighead had laughed in reply. All along he had believed that there was some "pose" in this unprecedented situation. His reply was given in a tone of confidence, — "I do not anticipate much difficulty."

The Judge's face was sober. "Don't you be too cocksure, young man. Those people are prouder than Lucifer, and the fact that they are about to starve won't make a jot of difference. In my opinion your one chance is through the grandchild, — a girl, I believe."

"I count on her, you may be sure. Isn't that my chief reason for going, that I may assure myself she has been informed of the facts? An awkward country-girl! I have n't any doubt what her answer will be."

"She's old Dexter's grandchild. You have read his letters."

Craighead now pondered upon this conversation with more earnestness than he had felt or shown at the time. Somehow the certainty of success had begun to fade in proportion as the distance between Boston and the experiment lessened. The unthrift and desolation of the land argued badly for ambition in its owners.

His destination, a small country village in that state of gentle name, Alabama, could be reached only by changing cars at one of the large cities. He got out at a dilapidated station, redolent of tobacco, gasolene, and peanuts, and was surprised to find it the "Union Depot" of an important town. The little branch line was ready, and waiting for passengers, and in a very short time Van, in a "day-car" of ancient design, was rattling out over transparent brown streams, and through miles of primeval pine-forests. The dark foliage masses that now hemmed his track were almost unbroken by farms; and the monotony of landscape, combined with the slow, regular jog of the train gradually induced its few occupants to slumber.

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived at Dexter-ville. Craighead stepped from the car directly upon a level board platform about four feet from the earth. The station building was constructed after the architectural design of a Noah's Ark, and painted in much the same color-scheme with which children associate that venerable house-boat. Two signs in white and blue, "Southern Express Office," and "Western Union Telegraph," glared out from the front elevation. The earth close about the building was hard, red, and trampled. Misty brown woods, with drowsy sparrows instead of leaves on bare branches, stood off in a disdainful circle. A few strange vehicles

with steeds, the like of which Van had never seen before, were hitched all about the house and platform, as strings of fish are tied to a boat.

The train halted for a moment only. Craighead saw his luggage, together with some barrels and boxes, flung out of the baggage car. Then came an impatient scream from the engine, a snort of soot, a frightened shiver among the trees, and the long, jointed monster curved off hooting. The Bostonian stood quietly watching its hurried retreat, until the last puff of smoke rose from among the trees. Its track lay like a rusty scimeter along the earth.

All at once he had a curious sense of being hopelessly cut off from civilization. The very silence was appalling. He turned toward the station door. A few loafers were shouldering the door-frame, but no one spoke. He stepped quickly forward; the loafers writhed and slunk away. Craighead, now somewhat annoyed, entered the open door and looked about for an agent, or some official to whom he could apply for information. The ticket-window presented a small semicircle of opaque glass. He rapped. A freckled face rose up, and sheepishly fitted itself to the aperture.

"Can you direct me to the residence of Colonel John Dexter?"

The clerk reddened until his freckles became magenta. He threw an agonized glance toward the door.

"Ef — ef you're the lawyer from Bostin, old man Dexter's sent down a nigger and a mule fer you."

Craighead fixed keen eyes upon him. For a moment he suspected ridicule.

"Do you mean that Colonel Dexter has sent a conveyance?" His enunciation was as clean and crisp as hail.

"He's sent a nigger and a team," repeated the clerk. Then with sudden inspiration, "They're waitin' out there. I'll show you."

He hurried out awkwardly, Craighead following. By this time it was almost dark. Purple mist claimed the

trees, and a few bold stars waded the incoming tide of night. In the west the sun's after-glow spread an open fan of dull red; and the click of frogs and crickets went like cold shuttles, backward and forward, through the warp of gloom. The clerk leaned forward over the platform.

"Norah!" he called, "you there?" A grunt rose through the dusk.

"Drive roun' here to the steps, you old fool nigger, you! Do you reckon this gen'l'man wants to stay here all night?"

"Nobody ain't called me befo'," murmured a reproachful voice; and then, amid creaking of wheels, clapping of reins, and detonations of "Whoa!" a vehicle slowly crawled up to the steps.

Craighead entered cautiously, taking a seat beside the driver. His valise was lifted into an open compartment behind, the reins were clapped anew, and the ancient buggy jolted off into a void of dark that soon swallowed it from the watchful gaze of the clerk.

A group of loafers, black and white, ringed the little station stove. They made pretence of warming hands by the few red coals, rubbing and twisting until their joints cracked audibly; standing first on one leg and then on the other, and making curious shuffling noises with their heavy feet on the sanded boards. The more phlegmatic forbore these social demonstrations, and contented themselves with "plunking" tobacco-juice into the sand-filled soap-box which served for cuspidor.

All knew what was to be the coming topic of conversation, but pleased themselves with pretended unconsciousness. It was the freckled clerk who broke the spell. His sudden cackle sent ripples of anticipatory mirth over the rough faces of his hearers. "Bless Pat!" he began, "ef I could make out a word of his darned lingo at first. What a soapy dood! Ef he had n't er said 'Dexter,' I never would 'a' knowed what he was after."

"He's wuss than a Piskerpul preacher," volunteered another, who happened to be elder in the Dexterville Baptist Church.

A third, punching his neighbor, a large, raw-boned negro, in the ribs, said, "Them's the sort o' things that loves niggers, Jake. He fit fer you, an' stole fer you, — fit white men, too."

"Dat ain't nothin' to me," retorted Jake, sullenly. "He never done me no good. I has to work harder dan my daddy did befo' me, an' don't get ez much, neider."

"He looks for all the world like the paper-doll men my little Jinny cuts outer her ma's fashion books," said one of the seated scoffers; and this sally met with a response that almost shook the stove from its three precarious legs.

CHAPTER IV

FIRE-ROSES

CRAIGHEAD sat by the silent driver, taking in critically the bad condition of the roads, the cool night-smell of the woods, the lustre of the soft, low stars. Automatically he drew out a silk muffler and knotted it about his throat. "How far have we to go?"

The old negro started, as if caught in the midst of uncomplimentary reflections. "Oh not fur, not fur!" Then, with more composure, "It's jes' pas' de still, cross de hammock, up de raid ridge, an' you's dare."

Van laughed. "How many miles is it?"

"Law, boss! I ain't nebber mejjered it!"

Van gave up the problem. "Did I understand your name to be Norah?"

"Yassir, dat's it. Same as in de Bible. Norah an' de ark. When my ole woman was libbin' dey called her de Ark, she was dat ongodly fat." The old man chuckled. Apparently the Ark's demise had not deprived him of his sense of humor.

Soon the "still" was reached, a tiny turpentine distillery with a crooked little chimney in silhouette against the stars; then the "hammock," a shimmering, white road, spongy with wet, and sunken among the stems of great, black foliaged trees that seemed to drip with honey, myrrh, and rum; then an upward tilt to the "ridge" where the clean smell of pines fought with the damp frankincense of the valley. At the top of the ridge they came upon a long, white fence gleaming through the starlit gloom like a shell-road set on edge. Suddenly they turned into a lane that smelled of cows, and after a hundred yards or

more stopped beside a gate, with a dim, growing arch above it.

A voice rose with startling clearness, — “Did he come, Norah?”

“Yassir! Got him dis time, shore!”

“Ah, then, — welcome, Mr. Craighead! Welcome to the Big House! I’m right glad to see you, sir!”

Craighead peered about for his host, the conventional smirk of greeting fixed for duty. A large hand was stretched upward to him across the wheel. The young man grasped it firmly, if obliquely, and by its assistance made his way to the ground.

“Welcome, sir!” again rang out the deep voice. “Welcome to the South!”

They walked together toward twinkling lights, through lines of close-set, pointed cedars.

“The climate of your South is very mild and pleasant,” remarked Van, politely. “Quite a contrast to New England, I assure you.”

“I reckon so, I reckon *so*,” returned the Colonel, with something like a gurgle of satisfaction. “Is this your first trip down South, sir?”

“Yes, my first.”

“Ah,” said the old man in a lower voice, “you should have seen it in the old days. Those were great days.” He threw back his fine old head, as if impatient of his own memories, stepped forward more briskly, and said: “But February still gives us blue skies and bluer violets. Here we are! Look out for that second step, sir, — it’s a little weak in the underpinnings.”

The big, square doorway of the hall was open, and against the somewhat dingy light vibrated a little darky, evidently in great excitement. At a signal from Colonel Dexter, he darted forward to take the “gen’l’mans” hat and coat.

“The ladies await us in the parlor,” said the Colonel, leading on.

"But —" Van remonstrated, — "my cuffs! my er — toilet!"

"Oh, they won't mind," declared his host. "They know what a trip you 've had."

No time was given for further objections. Already the parlor door was wide open, and a slender woman in black advanced to meet them. Craighead paused on the threshold. The old man's eyes filled with light as he led his wife toward their guest.

"This is Mr. Craighead, Dolly. This is my wife, Mr. Craighead."

Mrs. Dexter presented a delicate, gracious hand. Craighead took it in his own, and with an impulse of old-time courtesy, bent down and kissed it. Afterward he wondered how he had come to do so unusual a thing, but any other action would have astonished the recipient.

"You are welcome," she said simply. "I hope we shall be able to make you comfortable in our old-fashioned home."

Craighead thought her voice as exquisite as her manner. He had not yet seen her face in full light. Now she retraced her steps toward the centre of the room and stood directly under the quaint old hanging lamp, in the midst of antique furniture and draperies. Her hair was white, her face almost as colorless, and her hands like carven ivory. She was a vision from some vanished world of purity and gentle chivalry. One could not wish to picture her as young, or in any way changed. Her charm was of a beauty that had deepened with her life; a nature that suffering and experience had mellowed into perfect texture. Out of her pale face shone two patient, starry eyes, humid with tenderness. One thought them the loveliest things on earth until she smiled, and then her smile was lovelier. The Colonel's face was full of pride, almost of worship, as he saw her for the first time in many years through the admiration of another man's eyes.

"But where is Truth?" he cried, realizing at last that the heroine of this strange situation had yet to be presented.

"She was here a moment ago," said Mrs. Dexter, glancing about the room.

"Truthie! Truthie!" shouted the Colonel, as if she were at the bottom of the hill.

A tall, slim, awkward figure rose from somewhere among the chair-shadows, and approached reluctantly.

"Walk up, lassie! Don't be afraid!" shouted the Colonel in his excitement. "This is Mr. Craighead, from Boston. This is my granddaughter, Mr. Craighead." He gave the latter a meaning look, and nodded, as if to warn him against premature revelations.

Truth stretched out a long, sunburned hand in the direction of Craighead's polite murmur, much as one might offer a scrap of food to a caged monkey. The young man barely touched it. If he felt anything, it was a sense of disappointment. This crude country girl might not, after all, count for much in the sum of his calculations.

Mrs. Dexter turned to her husband. "I think Mr. Craighead might like to go to his room, dear. Tea will be ready in half an hour."

"Why, of course!" cried the Colonel. "I ought to ha' thought of it. Here, Nickey" (to the grinning little darky at the door), "fetch a candle. I'll show him up myself."

Van followed his portly guide through a long, gloomy corridor and up bare steps, to a large, closed door. This, with one ample gesture, his host threw open. Craighead actually started back in alarm. The room seemed on fire. Breasting a swirling torrent of light he made his way through the entrance. The ceiling was a sky of flame, the floor a sunset sea, the white walls wings.

Colonel Dexter laughed aloud. "You don't see such fires as that in Boston, I reckon. Dolly told them to

start you a little blaze, just to keep off the chill." Still laughing, he closed the door, and Van heard his heavy footsteps as they echoed down the stair and the uncarpeted hall.

The young man stood motionless before a revelation of fire. Within the great open hearth a knotted mass of fire-devils writhed and fought. The bronze andirons were in the form of sphinxes. Like pythons of fate they stood, their gaunt claws digging into the stone, prophecies of flame gleaming through the slit apertures of their eyes. Knurls and hunchbacks of pine, writhing separately, hissed wrath in blue gusts of imprecation. Adder tongues of red licked down flakes of quivering soot; pine-knots, grown incandescent, rolled, like phoenix eggs, out of whorled nests of fire. Craighead leaned closer, unconscious of the intense heat. In the very centre of the fire lived, rather than burned, a cluster of roses,—such roses as might bloom in a world where gold and iron are blinding gases; bridal wreaths of delirious salamanders; topaz textures cut from the self-consuming substance of time, brittle as spasms of joy, fatal as death-draughts of passion. A faint trans-spectral blue, like perfume made visible, oozed from the heart of the central rose.

Craighead dashed the drops from his forehead, threw himself into a chair, and gazed on. The fire had already begun to fall away. Shadows, like strange, misshapen animals, crept out of uncertain corners and stole noiselessly toward him, until the star-burst of a snapping twig sent them scampering back in panic. At each stampede the staid old furniture jumped, and the polished floor curdled into molten bronze.

The eyes of the sphinx burned into Craighead's soul. Though usually an unimaginative man, his very keenness of perception forced him into consciousness of that tense, tragic poise of Fate, which precedes her irrevocable decisions.

"Am I the sphinx,—or is she?" he muttered. "Whose

is the hell of flame? And the roses,—are they immortal?”

At that instant, as if in answer to his question, the great central burr began to fall away into ashes. It went very quietly, not leaf by leaf, but all at once, with awful completeness. Craighead strained his eyes to the void. The circle of its non-existence was a thing more vivid than the roses themselves had been.

Something seemed tapping upon a hollow brain. The sound came again, then again. He realized that some one knocked at the door. A little voice arose. “Here’s a tellygraf fer you, mister.”

A dash of icy brine could not have been more of a shock. He snatched the yellow envelope without a word, and slammed the door in the little messenger’s face. Afterward, in the servants’ quarters, Nickey expressed the opinion that “Yankees aint got no moa’ raisin’ dan a buck-rabbit.”

Craighead threw himself back into the easy-chair, holding the paper between tense fingers, like a prisoner confronted with evidence of his crime. He knew how one must feel who comes to the dock for sentence.

A few moments before and that tangled web of doubts had lain far behind him, a dim trouble from which he had been glad to escape into a new world. The balm of Southern air, the placidity of the old negro and his “team,” and the fine hospitality of the Colonel and Mrs. Dexter had almost obliterated Boston.

Even at Charlotte he had begun to pride himself on having exorcised the spectre. Of course her answer would be “No.” But now he trembled to his finger-tips for fear it might be “No.” Did he want to lose her? Did he want to believe her a trickster? At least he did not want to be forced into hating her!

He got up and locked the door. Suddenly he felt a desire to thrust the yellow menace and its secret deep into the red ashes, and let both vanish with the fire-roses. He tore the outer envelope and read as follows:—

"Cannot answer as you wish. Do not take this for no. Wait for my letter. O."

His face hardened into that of a third sphinx. A revulsion of feeling swept over him. He knew it was bitter disappointment; he hated her for her failure to face the issue. She stood self-condemned, and he knew it now to be indeed the end.

It was a mortal wound to his vanity. With the very breath in which he congratulated himself on his escape, he muttered anathemas. And a letter was still to come! Well, he need not answer. He had given the ultimatum and she had failed. She should never see him again.

That inner conventional part of us which sometimes in later life absorbs and destroys the individual self, warned Craighead that a summons to tea would soon be forthcoming. He dressed himself like an automaton, and promptly, at the sound of the bell, went downstairs.

Truth was not at the table, and Craighead wondered vaguely whether she still kept to the habits of her childhood and was sent to bed at dark. The supper was a typical Southern one of tea, hot-rolls, thin-sliced ham, and preserves.

Conversation was desultory, and also a little forced. The thoughts of all seemed to be on other matters. As the little party rose, Colonel Dexter said, with an affectation of carelessness, "I reckon you're too tired to talk over anything like business to-night."

"Consider me entirely at your service," replied Van, politely. "I do not feel at all fatigued."

The Colonel looked helplessly toward his wife.

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Craighead," she smiled, "but we old country people are used to going to bed early. I am sure we will all be fresher for a night's rest."

"Yes, right after breakfast to-morrow will be better," added the Colonel, eagerly.

Van bowed acquiescence and went to his room, where, numbed with the bewilderment of new impressions and troubled thoughts, he soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

THE HEROINE AT BREAKFAST

CRAIGHEAD woke early, refreshed and clear-headed from his deep slumber. The dawn had come in with a silence unknown to his city life. Instead of the strident dissonance of factory whistles and the clang of electric cars, he heard the tinkle and twitter of birds and the unfamiliar crowing of cocks. A strong, resinous smell was in the room; the bed linen was steeped in the subtle odor of "deer-tongue" and dried sweet-grass. By some untraceable line of suggestion, the sudden reality of a past that he ought always to have known was strong upon him.

A rich, pink light hung in the window-panes, and found its way to the walls, against which the dark mahogany furniture stood delightfully stiff. The air was quite cool. He glanced toward the fireplace: the two tame sphinxes sat drowsily among dead ashes.

Van sprang from the bed, and, throwing a dressing-gown about him, stepped at random to one of the many tall windows. As in most old-fashioned country homes, the blinds were kept fastened back against the outer walls, the windows being amply shaded by two sets of curtains, the under ones white, the upper of some dark, rich stuff. In summer these latter would be exchanged for bright-colored chintz. Van, with a single, cautious gesture, drew aside both hangings, and looked out. Against a sparkling blue sky, little rosy fleeces melted without diminishing their flock. Below, a large, unkempt enclosure, half lawn, half park, was held within bounds by stiff hedges of evergreens, such as he could not remember having seen elsewhere.

Under an oak-tree facing the window, stood a girl whom he knew must be Truth Dexter. He had seen her for but one uncomfortable moment, the night before, under the parlor lamp. She was bareheaded now, as then, but the keen spring wind, blowing from behind, sent the fine blonde strands out in a golden thatch above her laughing eyes. Her cheeks were pinker than the sky; her slender young figure was drawn up stiffly, back to back with the oak, and before her sat an audience of three dogs, — two large pointers, and one terrier, — whose bodies, as she talked, writhed in ecstasies of excitement and impatience. In her outstretched hands she held huge wedges of some kind of bread-stuff, with which Van later became familiar under the name of "corn-dodger."

"What a pity she's such an uneducated gawk!" thought the young man. "What will she do with all that money? Turn snob, I suppose."

Here agonized yelps from the dogs interrupted his uncomplimentary speculations. Evidently Truth was interspersing her benefices with admonition. Her clear voice carried straight to his ear.

"Everybody says that dogs are greedy." Reproachful howl from one of the pointers.

"I did n't mean only you, Jeff, but all of you — all. Now, mind, I'm goin' to teach you manners. You must learn to get your breakfast, one at a time, like *folks*. Here, Huckleberry, you're the littlest. Here, Huck!" Three smothered cries and a simultaneous rush.

The bread was deftly secreted under her cape. "There, now! Just look at that! Once more, — here, Huckleberry! *Down*, Jeff!" Her gestures were full of grace and vehemence.

The little terrier advanced with apologetic meekness, received a pat on the head and his rations; the latter of which the two big dogs immediately fell upon and devoured.

"Well, if I ever!" cried the young tutor. "No wonder folks call you greedy."

She seized a bit of twig from the grass and ran toward them, her cheeks scarlet, her face eager with pretended indignation, her hair like the silk of newly ripened milk-weed.

Van leaned to watch her, unmindful of etiquette. The dogs at first made as if to run; then, secure in their estimate of her clemency, bounded back, and threw themselves fawning upon her. During the skirmish the corn-bread was dropped, and in furtive gulps devoured.

The lesson in restraint ended in a romp; and the last Craighead saw of the group, Truth was playing hide-and-seek among the trees, dodging the big dogs, behind whom the little terrier yelped and plunged and doubled in desperate pursuit.

"She's a hoyden," declared Van, turning from the window at last. "Not exactly my idea of a Southern belle and heiress. What a contrast to —"

But the comparison was not finished. Instead, the young lawyer began to whistle the Pilgrim's Chorus, an air of which he professed himself very fond, and which he invariably confounded with the wedding march from Lohengrin.

The breakfast bell finally rang, and he entered just as Mrs. Dexter turned from some last feminine touches upon the richly appointed table. A warm light, tempered with the shadows of trellised vines, fell through an east window. The charm of the hostess's face blended well with the stately English silver and the quaint Dutch service. Colonel Dexter hurried in and gave him hearty greeting with the hand-grasp of a Samson, and the eyes of a child. "Hope you are rested, sir, after your night's sleep."

Truth was not yet in the room. They were all seated about the table when she entered. Her eyes were downcast, as they had been when she was first introduced; and she advanced with the same lack of ease. It did not seem possible that this was the same girl who, an hour before,

had bounded over dew-wet lawns with the grace of a young Diana. Her fluffy hair was again brushed into rigid smoothness. She wore a very badly cut frock, buttoned behind, and scantily trimmed with red and white embroidery. She did not look at Van as she slid into her chair with a single apologetic "Good-mornin'."

"Fried chicken and hominy!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Well, I'm ready for my share! What part do you take, Mr. Craighead?"

Craighead made the usual inane rejoinder of "anything," at which the Colonel loaded his plate with half a full-grown fowl, and then proceeded to utilize the small remaining space for hominy. Evidently this family had never heard of the indispensable Northern "porridge."

"Tea, or coffee, Mr. Craighead?" came from Mrs. Dexter's smiling lips.

A bowl of early wild-flowers stood in the middle of the table. This was flanked on one side by a glass dish of honey, on the other by a similar dish filled with fig preserves.

The Colonel was by this time serving Truth.

"Here's the gizzard for you, Truthie," he laughed. "It'll make you pretty. I always save her the gizzards, you know." He turned to enlighten the guest. "All girls are that way."

Truth refused to smile.

"Why, what's the matter, lassie?" asked the old man, leaning over to pat her shoulder. "Where is the twitter of our song-bird this morning?"

Truth gave him an agonized glance, and dropped her knife.

Van began a hurried conversation with Mrs. Dexter, but that gentle soul was too much perturbed by her granddaughter's awkwardness to respond satisfactorily.

Thinking to assist his hostess by so doing, Van put a direct question to the girl.

"Are you fond of dogs, Miss Dexter?"

No answer.

"Mr. Craighead spoke to you, Truth," said Mrs. Dexter, nervously.

"Oh," cried the girl, lifting a crimson face, "I thought he said Mis's Dexter."

Craighead was still looking at her in courteous expectation of a reply. She sent him a hostile and miserable glance. "Yes. I like dogs. I love them."

Another bang and clatter! She had dropped her fork.

"Easy, easy, little girl," cried the Colonel. "Mr. Craighead's not goin' to eat you. I never saw you so scared of a stranger before."

"I'm not scared!" Truth flashed out at the Colonel. Her face was burning, and her eyes black with misery and tears. She tried to eat, but her fingers trembled. She drooped her head over, almost to the table.

"What *is* the matter, then?" demanded the Colonel, somewhat impatiently. "I never saw you do this way before!"

But Truth's little defences were down. Nothing was left but flight. Rising from the table, she literally ran from the room, dropping her napkin as she fled.

"I don't know what you will think of our little girl, Mr. Craighead," said sweet Mrs. Dexter, with tears in her lovely eyes. "We live *so* quietly. She has seen so few people except our closest kin." Her guest hastened to reassure her, in polite phrases which conveyed the opposite of his real impressions.

The conversation lagged. Craighead referred, in general terms, to the purpose of his visit. As they rose from the table, Colonel Dexter touched his arm.

"Can you come into the library now?" he asked. "Maybe we'd better talk this over by ourselves, first; and then we can call Dolly and Truth."

Left alone, Mrs. Dexter hurried to Truth's room. The girl was pacing the floor like a young tigress, gasping out broken sentences between her sobs.

"Oh, how I hate him! — how I *loathe* him! The miserable Yankee! Why did I drop my knife? Why did I? *Why* did I cry?"

"Truth!" cried the grandmother, catching breath at last, "are you crazy?"

The girl broke into fresh sobs. "How long is that man goin' to be here? I won't live in the same house with him! He don't belong here. He's only makin' fun of us all! Oh — oh, I hate him! Did you see how he looked at breakfast, — his eyes like little red-hot tacks, burning you? And his nose, — like a can-opener! And a mouth that shuts with a steel spring, like a rat-trap, — I heard it click, — and his whiskers, nasty little red-brown things, like dirt-dauber nests stuck onto his face!"

"Truth Dexter!" broke in the old lady in tones that Truth had never heard before, "have you gone out of your senses? Have you forgotten that you are a lady?"

Truth threw herself face-down upon the bed. "Why did he come?" she sobbed, in more broken tones. "He does n't care anything about us. How did he hear about us, anyway?"

Mrs. Dexter waited until the sobs had quieted down a little, then went to the bed, and sat on the edge, beside the prostrate figure. She was terrified at this undreamed-of violence.

"Truth," she began solemnly, "you must learn to control yourself better than this. I cannot tell you how unhappy you make me. This young man is a lawyer, and he came because he thinks — he has been told — he can do us a great service. Maybe he can. He thinks he can get us a big fortune."

Mrs. Dexter sighed deeply. Truth lay perfectly still for a moment, then she asked, "And did he come all the way down South just to do us good?"

"Ye-es," replied Mrs. Dexter, a little doubtfully. She did not think it the time to enlighten Truth with regard

to possible lawyer's fees. Her words sank quickly into the girl's generous heart.

"Well, maybe he ain't so bad, after all," she conceded. "He can't help it if he is funny and — different, can he?" After a pause, "A fortune means lots of money, don't it, Grandma? I thought you said we were poor."

"We are indeed poor," said Mrs. Dexter, with another sigh. "We need the money badly enough; but your grandfather will not accept it. So the lawyers say that it belongs to you, and that your grandfather ought not to keep you from having it."

"*Me!*" echoed Truth, and sat upright. "Is it a big fortune, grandma?"

"It is more than your grandfather had before the war!"

Truth gasped for breath. "More than grandpa had before the war!" she repeated. She was awed, as if a fairy tale were about to become true under her eyes. The oft-related splendor of that half-mythical period, the recollection of her passionate regret that she had not lived in the good days "*fo' de war*," began to weave themselves into fantastic shapes of imaginative possibilities, until she could hardly bear the pressure.

"De Colonel sez would you an' Miss Trufe please ter step down to de liberry, Miss Dolly," piped a voice at the door.

"Yes, Nickey," from Mrs. Dexter, "we will come at once." Then to Truth, "Brush your hair, darling, and bathe your face. You shall hear about it all from the lawyer himself. But do remember that he means well, and that you are a lady." Truth arose as one dazed, and did as she was bid. A few moments later she followed her grandmother into the library.

CHAPTER VI

A REJECTED FORTUNE

THE library was big, heavy, and old-fashioned, like the rest of the house. A massive fireplace dominated one entire wall, and the broad, square chimney-shaft jutted out at least six feet into the room. The mantel-shelf, stained black with smoke and age, was deep and high. Above it two flagstuffs crossed, from one of which drooped an old revolutionary banner and from the other a tattered and blood-stained emblem of the Confederacy. This martial display was flanked by two oval wood-engravings framed in black and gold,—one of George Washington; its companion, the Indian-like profile of Jefferson Davis. At one side of the shaft hung a rack filled with swords and firearms, at the other a collection of antlers, deer-heads, and one enormous stuffed rattlesnake.

The rest of the apartment conformed more closely to its legitimate appellation of "library." All available space was filled with tall bookcases, whose glass doors revealed a goodly selection of English classics. On the summit of each case perched a plaster bust. There were Sir Walter Scott, whose hair needed trimming; Lord Byron with a plaster-of-Paris nightshirt thrown back to display his rounded throat; that fox-like face labelled "Shakespeare," which never impresses any one as looking the least like the real man; and Milton, not more blind than the rest, in this colorless abstract of living features. Volumes of Audubon's birds and Catlin's "North American Indians" disputed for conspicuous places on the great carved centre-table. Fox's "Book of Martyrs," and "Thomas à Kempis" were also in plain sight. An old-

fashioned, waxy portrait of Mrs. Dexter as a young girl hung over the Colonel's mahogany desk.

Colonel Dexter sat fidgeting in his big chair, leaning over, now and again, to rearrange a mass of loose papers that lay on the desk before him. Craighead rose as the ladies entered; and as soon as they had taken seats, fell back nonchalantly into his arm-chair. This was easy vacation work for him, and he saw a substantial fee in the background. Moreover, the case had aspects of both novelty and humor. He threw a momentary, inquisitive glance at Truth, who was apparently oblivious of his presence; then allowed his features to lapse into a professional smirk of polite if impersonal satisfaction.

"Hm-m-m-m-!" he remarked, clearing his throat.

The Colonel started, looked around the room, then leaned heavily on his desk. "Gad! I don't know how to begin!" he said. "I know Truth ought to hear. It's about her. I reckon I'll have to tell her." His tone was irresolute.

"Or," said Van, "if you find the duty irksome, I shall be most happy to communicate the facts."

"No!" exclaimed Truth, suddenly, throwing him a scornful glance, "let grandpa!"

She walked over to the old man, put one strong young arm around his neck, lifted her head, and confronted Craighead with something like defiance.

The young man could scarcely conceal a smile of amusement, and perhaps admiration, for it seemed to be the real Truth at last who thus challenged him. "She has spunk, after all," he thought. "Thank Heaven for it!"

Meanwhile the Colonel, oblivious of this by-play, was puffing and panting in anticipation of the monologue before him. Suddenly he drew Truth down to the arm of his chair, and began:—

"You see, lassie — I never told you. I did n't want it talked about — you've never heard me speak about my only brother, Eugene — your Uncle Eugene." He stopped as if unable to proceed.

"I 've seen his picture," said Truth, wonderingly. "But I thought he died years and years ago."

"No, — not long ago, — not long ago. It was only just lately, Mr. Craighead tells me. But he's been dead to me for many years, for I disowned him when he turned against the South. Yes, he turned against his country in her hour of need! It was that damned Yankee college that mildewed his soul! He fought against us, Truth! Fought against the land that bore him! May God forgive him, I can't!"

"He's dead now, you know," reminded Craighead, gently.

The Colonel dropped his head. "Yes, he's dead now. My brother Eugene! And I have n't seen him since he was a boy of nineteen, — since he stood up before my face and told me that his convictions led him to fight for the Union. Convictions!" cried the old man, his excitement rising, "convictions! What right had anybody to convictions when the South was in danger?"

He sprang from his chair, nearly overturning Truth, and began to pace up and down the room in a frenzy of remembrance.

"But, grandpa," Truth ventured.

"Yes, yes, I'll finish," said he, returning to his place. "After the war, — that hireling victory, — he went back to his breeding-pen of rascals in Boston (I beg your pardon, Mr. Craighead), and made himself a millionaire. I don't know how he did it. I don't want to know."

"Railroad stocks," put in Van, softly.

Truth's face and posture were alert with interest. Her grandfather went on.

"He never married. No decent woman would have him, I reckon. About ten years later he had the impudence to write to me, askin' for reconciliation, as he called it, and offerin' to leave all his money to me."

Truth caught her breath. "What did you say, daddy? You did n't *take* it!"

"Take it!" shouted the Colonel. "Take it! I wrote him that if he ever dared to send down one nickel of his damned Potter's-Field blood-money to the land he had betrayed, I'd come up North and thrash him with my own hands! Take it! I *reckon*!"—and the Colonel snorted like an old war-horse.

"Has he sent it to us anyway?" whispered the girl, a faint comprehension beginning to dawn upon her.

The old man did not seem to hear. "That was years ago. I never heard from him again after that. He went away to Europe, and died in Turkey, or Holland, or some of those heathen countries. He never even heard of you, lassie, for he has left everything to your poor dead father. I don't believe that he knew John was dead, or even married, though he does say 'John, or his heirs.'"

"My beloved nephew, John Spottswood Dexter, or any of his issue who may be living," corrected Craighead, in an emotionless voice.

"That's it," assented the Colonel. "And so you are the heir, Truth. It's all yours, if you are willing to take it."

"How did Mr. Craighead find all this out?" asked the girl, suddenly. She looked squarely at the lawyer, and her face, as well as her tone, expressed suspicion.

Craighead was surprised and amused. "Your uncle appointed Judge Adams, of Boston, executor, Miss Dexter, and the Judge has put into my hands the case of identifying the legal heirs."

"Then you have come all this way to see if I was myself?"

Craighead laughed. "That is an unusual way of stating it; but, if it serves to convey the impression to your mind—"

"And have I got to take it whether I want to or not?" She rose from the arm of the chair, and stood straight and tall under the big mantel.

"No, Miss Dexter. It may be refused for you by your legal guardians, or by yourself, when you come of age."

Truth looked puzzled. She did not know what "come of age" meant. She shifted her eyes from his, frowned in a troubled sort of way, then blurted out, "If I refuse, do you get it?"

Mrs. Dexter colored, and gave an exclamation of displeasure; but the Colonel looked at Craighead.

The young man laughed again. "I regret to say that I have no such hopes. But your question is well asked. If your grandfather will show you a copy of the document you will see that it provides for a refusal by creating, in that case, a trust, whose holders shall apply the income first, to the erection of a superb architectural monument and statue to the memory of Abraham Lincoln, and, after that, to the support of a soldiers' home for his disabled and indigent veterans."

"That's the worst of it all!" the Colonel broke in. "The rascal! That's what I can't forgive,—tryin' to trick me from his very grave!" But even in the midst of indignation a humorous expression began to creep into the old man's eyes. He leaned back in his chair, looked slowly around upon the expectant faces, then burst into a grim sort of chuckle as he said,—

"But it was a right smart trick! Now, was n't it a right smart trick, Mr. Craighead?"

Craighead assured him that it was; then, with eyes on Truth, remarked, "Your property, Miss Dexter, is carefully invested in the best of bonds and Boston real estate, and is valued at —"

"Would I have to go up North, myself?" the girl broke in.

Van hesitated. "Possibly not. It could be managed by an agent intrusted with your power of attorney. But either you or your grandfather might need to come up once, and give the matter careful investigation."

Truth turned slowly from the fireplace and walked over to a stiff, high-backed chair, where she seated herself with thoughtful precision. Craighead was impressed by

the dignity of her carriage. Apparently she was thinking very deeply. In a moment she raised her eyes to look at her grandfather. His broad, flushed face, half-averted toward the littered desk, was more troubled than she had ever seen it. She looked at Mrs. Dexter, but that gentle soul was sitting with drooped head, a slender white hand shading her brow. Lastly she turned her eyes towards Craighead's impregnable front, and the tenderness went out of her face.

"I think, Mr. Craighead," she said slowly, "I think you had better go back to Boston and begin on your statue of Abe Lincoln."

Craighead bit his lips to repress a smile. He was thinking how this story would be received at the Tavern Club.

"Am I to understand, Miss Dexter, that you are thinking of refusing this splendid fortune?"

"I *have* refused it."

"With your permission, Colonel?" persisted the lawyer, with eyebrows raised in the direction of his host.

"Oh, botheration!" cried the Colonel, desperately. "I don't know what to say! I could n't touch it myself, but it don't seem right to keep it from Truthie. It would go hard with me to have it spent under my roof. And yet to think of another statue to that nigger-thief, Lincoln!"

"Political statues have always seemed to me a great mistake," said Van, evenly; "and this one will doubtless be represented by a great group of emancipated slaves kneeling at their rescuer's feet."

"Damnation!" roared the Colonel.

"What is Mrs. Dexter's opinion?" asked Craighead, deferentially, in sly pursuit of another success.

"Ah, Mr. Craighead," she sighed, "we ladies cannot settle such important matters. It goes to my heart to have Truth lose the advantages that such a fortune would give, yet I could n't advise her to do anything that would hurt her grandpa's feelings."

Truth tossed her blond head in the lawyer's direction

"It's all settled, Mr. Craighead. We need n't talk about it any more." She gave a queenly gesture of dismissal, and rose, as if to leave the room.

Craighead was not at all disturbed. His self-confidence had returned in full measure, and he was just beginning to enjoy himself. He spoke gently, but very distinctly.

"Really, Colonel Dexter, if I might venture to suggest, it is a great deal of money of which you are depriving your granddaughter. Is she, then, so amply provided for?"

The Colonel reddened angrily. This last remark was an impertinence.

"Really," continued Van, very quietly, "it becomes my duty to see that the primary wishes of the testator are carried out, if possible; and, before I take a negative answer back to the executor, I think it only proper that you should allow me the privilege of a family lawyer and adviser."

The Colonel continued to scowl in silence for a moment, then said, half mollified, but still reluctant, —

"My granddaughter will have nothing but the old place, and it is falling into decay."

"Just so!" assented Van, briskly, as if the answer were about what he had expected. He turned again toward the grandmother.

"Now, my dear Mrs. Dexter," he began, "I appeal to your motherly solicitude. Do not think for a moment that I disparage any of your fine Southern scruples and ideas of honor. I can sympathize deeply with the Colonel. Yet is it not true, in common sense as in law, that we should act in justice toward the living, rather than in indignation toward the dead? You two grandparents are this young lady's sole living guardians. A time must come when even you will not be with her — and she must be left alone —"

"No! no! no!" cried an agonized voice from near the doorway. "Don't let him talk like that! I can't bear it! He has no right!"

Truth ran across the room and threw herself on the sofa beside her grandmother. The old lady leaned over to whisper soothing words.

"My dear Miss Dexter," said Van, with a fatherly air, "believe me, I do not wish to shock you. But matters of property and succession, you must see, are facts that the merest common sense cannot ignore. Your entire future is now in the balance, and those who love you can have but one thought, your ultimate welfare. Mrs. Dexter agrees with me, I am sure."

He smiled toward the elder lady, and was met by a look sweet, direct, yet ineffably sad.

"Her happiness is all we have to live for," she said simply.

The Colonel ran his hands furiously through his short, iron-gray hair, and Truth put out a hand to her grandmother's arm, as if she feared that Craighead might yet spirit that gentle guardian away.

He continued to address Mrs. Dexter.

"Naturally I am ignorant of the resources of this farm, but can hardly suppose that it could be made to produce a revenue large enough to give your granddaughter that finish of higher education, and to maintain that position in society, which are hers by right of birth and breeding."

He pronounced the final words slowly, with feeling, and a courtly inclination of the head. Truth stared bewildered. The Colonel fumed. Craighead proceeded.

"I fear you do not realize the advantages of which you would deprive her. An educated young lady of to-day must possess a wide range of information and accomplishment. Many of our universities of the North are open to women."

Here the Colonel, who thought he saw an opening, interpolated.

"Then, sir, is it your idea for her to take this blood-money and spend it among those high-falutin' female suffrage colleges up North, where girls are taught that it is

old-fashioned to be ladies? I've read of 'em! Crowin' hens! Man-haters! Blue-stockin's! About as fit to be wives and mothers as jay-birds are to sing hymns!"

Here Mrs. Dexter interposed.

"You forget, dear, that there are many good seminaries and colleges in the South, too, — the Sophie Newcomb, for instance, at New Orleans."

But Craighead went on in a lordly manner.

"In these days it will not do to be provincial. A course of European travel is a necessity. An acquaintance with science, history, art, and literature will be indispensable to Miss Dexter, when she comes to visit in the highest social circles of Washington, New York, and Boston."

"What!" cried Truth, indignantly, "do you think I ever would come up to that cold, horrid North? I don't want to travel in Europe! I don't want any more education, I hate it! I just want to stay here, at home, forever and ever!"

"Yes," cried the Colonel, "what would become of the old place with Truth trapesing around in female seminaries? They'd turn it into a nigger school, I reckon! No, Sir! This is our homestead! It may not seem much to you, but it's all we've got, and I count on Truth to keep it up. What would Dexterville be without its Big House, and Dexters in it?"

"You exactly anticipate my thought," said Craighead, politely. "Pardon the question, but can the old homestead continue to support itself forever? Could an uneducated girl maintain it, even though it comes to her unincumbered?"

The Colonel reddened again, but his wife looked earnestly toward him, as if she, too, waited a decision.

"Hang it!" he cried, "no! The place is mortgaged, — but I can't see that that has any interest for you!"

Craighead leaned back in his chair, as if he assumed that the conference were about at an end.

"That settles it," he said quietly. "Without resources,

even if the young lady managed to keep alive, the homestead must incontestably fall into other hands. It is a natural part of your own plans that she should eventually marry. With the estate freed and improved, not to mention the charms of her own cultured mind and person, there will be no restriction to her choice. I congratulate you, Miss Dexter, upon your good fortune, and your ability to carry out your grandfather's dearest wish."

Truth gazed upon him with terror-stricken eyes. Already it seemed as if she were but part of his will, a product of those crisp, decisive sentences. Mrs. Dexter had hidden her face. But the Colonel sprang to his feet and stamped once or twice on the hearthrug as if trying to force extraneous energy into his fainting soul.

"Not so fast, young man!" he cried. "I reckon I have a little more to say about this, myself. I think I'll go and have it out alone. I'll saddle Black Betty, and go into the woods. I can always think things out better in the woods."

Mrs. Dexter drew a long, tremulous sigh of relief. She was glad of the respite. Craighead shrugged his shoulders slightly, and began feeling in an inner pocket for his cigar-case.

But the Colonel's face was already brightening. He gave Truth a loving pat on the shoulder in passing, then stooped for a few moments over his wife. She looked up at him through quick tears that seemed to magnify the love and comprehension never absent from those brown depths. It was not the first time that she had seen him fly to the woods and Black Betty for solutions.

She and Truth went to one of the library windows to see him ride away. Craighead had left the room. The last glimpse was of a jovial, but perplexed face, turned back to smile at them, and a heavy hand waved in a half-deprecating farewell.

CHAPTER VII

A TRAGEDY AND A HERO

THREE hours later Black Betty came home riderless. The big saddle was wrenched far over to one side, but the stoical beast showed no consciousness of disarray. She sauntered up the lane, stooping now and then to a scant blade of grass. The stable door was open. She walked to a stall and began nibbling hay from the rack overhead. The saddle struck heavily against the wooden partitions, and she looked round at it, wondering, for the first time, why the stable-boy was not in attendance. But she nibbled on in silence, her eyes expressing patient forgiveness for the unaccustomed neglect. Really, life was becoming very uncertain.

Norah was the first to discover her. Mrs. Dexter did not join the frantic little search-party. Craighead and Truth had started off at once, running, wordless and bare-headed, side by side, a swiftly accumulating crowd of darkies forming a dusky comet's tail behind them.

They found the Colonel not very far from home, stone dead, at the side of the road. There was nothing in the surroundings to suggest a stumble, or a fright of any kind. His body had apparently suffered no violence, only his face was still darkly suffused, as if from an apoplectic stroke. Truth made not the slightest sign of terror, or even of grief. She leaned over him a moment with something that was almost a smile, smoothed out his rumpled coat, straightened out a distorted arm, and then sat down, like a child, in the sand beside him.

The negroes gathered about in a wide ring, with gestures of insane excitement, and exultant terror. Their

eyes rolled horribly, their thick jaws quivered, and their low, strained whispers seemed to be in a savage language of their own. Craighead swept his glance about the ring, then gave a peremptory sign and order. In an instant they had all plunged into the woods, where the cracking of branches and the harsh rustle of trampled leaves accompanied the construction of a rude litter. Truth turned her head away as they lifted the heavy form, then walked quietly by its side until they reached the house.

Mrs. Dexter came out at the front door, and down the broad steps to meet them. She was as white as a corpse, herself. Van wondered, in his own strangely stirred heart, how any living woman could be so pale. The bearers halted, and old Norah burst into a piercing wail.

Mrs. Dexter leaned over, kissed her husband on the forehead very softly, and smoothed his coat as Truth had done. A bit of twig was crushed against his hair. This she lifted and held with careful tenderness, as if it were already a relic. Truth covered her face, and for the first time began to sob. But Mrs. Dexter, calm and white as an attendant angel, walked beside the bier.

"Good God!" muttered Van, "what heroines these women are!"

Seldom does a young man find himself plunged into a vortex of strange and unexpected circumstances so delicate and embarrassing as these in which Craighead now found himself and his private interests submerged. By a sudden stroke of fate he had become bound to these strangers, not only as fellow-mourner, but in the intimate relation of family adviser. He had planned to remain in the South but a day or two at most, and pressing legal business awaited him at home. But Craighead was not one to shirk a plain duty, however burdensome; besides, his sympathies were strangely aroused. As the helplessness of the family disclosed itself, he resolved to stand to the breach like a man.

When, after an hour or two, people began to arrive from the village, Craighead realized from their awkwardness and shy withdrawal that they would never dare to assume a part in the affairs of the aristocratic Dexters.

"Had Colonel Dexter no relatives?" he asked of an intelligent-looking woman.

"Lor'!" said the woman, "no near ones that I ever heard tell on. All his folks an' Miss Dolly's was from Virginny. Mis's Le Baron, down in Melvin, is a sort o' fo'th cousin."

"Send for her at once," said Craighead.

"Miss" Le Baron came that night, accompanied by her husband, a drawn and sickly youth; but that they should take charge of proceedings was an idea that never presented itself. Van saw that they would be little better than obstacles. In some vague way it seemed to them, as to the villagers, that Craighead had been sent by a thoughtful Providence as a sort of advance undertaker, and master of ceremonies.

The next morning a coroner, a reporter, and several grave Southern gentlemen arrived from Montgomery. They, too, accepted Van, as a matter of course, in his capacity of major-domo. "He's de fambly lawyer fum de No'th," had whispered old Norah, confidentially.

As rumors of the tragedy spread, telegrams and letters of condolence began to pour in. These Van was forced to take upon himself to answer. Fortunately he had money on hand to meet incidental expenses.

Mrs. Dexter, night or day, never left her seat beside her husband. Grief had set her far above earthly interests, and hour by hour she grew more white and frail, like a moon worn thin at dawn. Mere human pity would have moved Craighead to lift from her all material burden; but the strange relationship that had brought him into the gentle woman's life, as herald of its supreme tragedy, oppressed him with a remorseful sense of responsibility, and stirred in him a sentiment so deep, that already it seemed a personal affection.

Truth would have made an interesting study, had any one present noticed her. As remote, white, and silent, almost, as her grandmother, she had found no relief in tears, but moved around the house restlessly, trying to make herself useful, following Van from room to room, like a child that dreads to be left alone. She seemed to realize dumbly that she had already fallen into that state of loneliness and loss which Craighead, at the family interview, had so clearly pictured. He found her growing dependence on him strangely pathetic. It was hard to identify this heart-broken child, struggling so bravely against her first terrible grief, with the spirited girl who had wished, only two days before, to defy him.

On the evening after the sad little burial in the hill-side graveyard, Mrs. Dexter gradually lost consciousness, and Truth's hitherto passive grief flared up into new agony. She thought her grandmother was dying, and demanded, almost fiercely, of Craighead that he should save her.

"I will take the next train for Montgomery," said Van. "The first thing is to get advice from good physicians."

Norah accosted him in the hall.

"Marse Van, here's a little blue letter done come fer you jes' befo' de funeral. I did n't like to gib it to you den."

Craighead started back; the smell of the letter nauseated him. From the pure, sad world of his new sympathies, he was suddenly plunged back into a lake of fire. He cursed the weakness that had seduced him into sending that test.

"Wait a moment!" he commanded.

Norah remained meekly in the hall, while Craighead hurried into the library, straight to the Colonel's desk, where he could find stamps and stationery. Selecting an envelope at random, he tore the unopened missive into two clean halves, and enclosed the pieces without written

comment, inscribing on the back a familiar Boston address.

"Here, Noah! Mail that quick!" he cried, as he came out with the letter extended. "And, say, have the buggy ready in time to catch the next train!"

"Lor', Marse Van! you ain't er gwine to leab us, is you?"

"No, Noah. Don't worry! Take good care of your mistress until I get back. I'm only going to consult a city doctor about her health."

"An' de blessed Sabior knows she need it!" said the old man mournfully, but with evident relief.

As Craighead sped on in the comfortless night train, he could not sleep for surging thoughts. The letter burned like a scar against the strained exaltation of his mood. He could not loose from his soul a lingering taint of indignation and pique. He turned to Truth and Mrs. Dexter in a sort of virtuous triumph, as if hurling at the temptress his share in the pathetic nobility of their womanhood.

He consulted several physicians, and the verdict was always the same. It was no question of drugs and tonic, but of change. After the nervous collapse, old associations would be a swift suicide. She must be moved at once to some quiet resort of sea or mountain, it mattered little which. Mississippi Sound could be recommended. There competent doctors and nurses were obtainable.

As Craighead stood waiting at the Union Station for the little train back to Dexterville, the big express for the North rumbled in. The temptation to board it and get back to his office was strong upon him. The vision of Orchid smiling in triumph became a menace. And Mrs. Dexter could be saved by instant action only.

On the ride back he plunged deeper into the delicate problem that lay before him. He knew that he alone would be able to uproot his new friends from the soil of their grief-stricken home. Nothing but change could

save Mrs. Dexter from death, and poor Truth from the ultimate misfortune he had predicted. The question of the will returned with redoubled insistence. How long would they need to be away? Months, the doctors had said. How much would it cost? Craighead had paid expenses, so far, out of his own pocket. They must accept the fortune! But these two martyrs would be all the surer, now, to sacrifice themselves upon the altar of the dead Colonel's wishes. Neither was in a condition for argument. He racked his brain to find a way of escape from this closed circle.

Arriving at the Big House in the afternoon, he inquired first after Mrs. Dexter's health.

"Wuss an' wuss!" declared old Norah, choking back his tears. "Dis mornin' me an' Miss Troof lef' her a minnit, caze she seem so fas' asleep, an' de fust t'ing we knowed, she wuz in a dead swoon at de bottom of de gyardin on de way to de buryin'-groun', her po' little han's chuck full er dem little white hangin' flowers dey calls snow-draps, dat ole Marster wuz so lovin' wid." The old negro shuffled away sobbing, his coat-sleeve to his eyes.

Craighead went at once into the library, and began looking over papers in the Colonel's desk. After the close work of an hour, he had achieved a mastery of conditions. The Colonel's small income ceased with his death. The mortgage on the farm was not heavy, but the farm itself did not pay expenses. There was no life insurance. Mrs. Dexter, in all probability, had not enough cash about her to pay the funeral expenses. He and his wits alone stood between these two women and voluntary beggary.

As he was frowning away in the midst of these calculations, Truth came in upon him. She started back in indignation, and her eyes gathered something of their old fire. Van rose and offered her a chair.

"My dear Miss Dexter," he began, "it must pain you deeply to see a stranger at your grandfather's desk. The situation is even more painful to me. But something

must be done. You have no one else to help you, and it is necessary that you should know at once the state of the Colonel's affairs."

She seated herself in silence.

"Your grandmother is worse, I hear."

She gave a nod and a little dry sob. "Did Uncle Norah tell you?"

"Yes, it was heart rending."

"But what did the doctor say?"

"That she must go at once to the mountains or the sea."

A look of bewilderment passed into the girl's pale face. "Why, she's too sick to go travelling!"

"It is her only chance."

The bewilderment faded out into helplessness.

"But where can we take her?"

"We! Miss Dexter, I will do all I can to assist you in preparations, but I fear you will have to take her to the Gulf, alone. I must be getting back to my work in the North."

The helplessness became blank hopelessness. She looked at him in a kind of terror.

"Me!" she faltered. "I was never away from home in my life! I don't know — I could try — but I thought — you —" she broke off in embarrassment.

Craighead wanted to say, "What right have I to act for you now that you have rejected my offer?" but he restrained himself.

The girl lifted her head, and looked far away through the window with big, sunken, miserable eyes.

Craighead was strangely moved. By what ties was he becoming bound to this child? He must make the most of his evident power over her.

"Truth!" he said in a low voice, "Truth!"

It was the first time that he had ever used her personal name. She gave a start, brought her eyes to his, and began to color faintly.

"Tell me what I can do," she whispered.

Craighead rose and came nearer, but she did not shrink from him.

"My poor, dear child," he said, "your grandmother will die if we don't act at once. Some one has got to decide things. Shall I try to think out a way?"

"Oh, if you only *would*!" she pleaded. "Somehow I can't seem to think or feel, or even remember. I must be wicked not to suffer more. But I am all dead inside, like dry moss. I can't even cry, much."

Craighead looked into the eyes whose reproach was a lack of tears. It was an experience for him, and his feelings were mixed. Probably the lawyer was uppermost.

"Truth," he said, "I want you to promise me one thing. I want you to promise to do what, after careful thinking, I may decide. Your grandmother cannot be consulted. You must give me power to act in her place; otherwise I have no right to stay here. Will you promise?"

The girl, ignorant though she was, knew that she was being nerved for some test which she could not yet understand, but she did not shrink from it. She met his intent look squarely, as she said.

"Just tell me what to do. If it is to save her, I will do it."

"Thank you, Truth. You are a brave girl!"

The sympathy in his voice made her tremble. She gave one great, suffocating sob, tried to speak, but failing, put up one hand to her throat, and fled.

Armed with Truth's promise, Craighead returned to his room, and sat long before the cold and empty fireplace, thinking. No one had thought to start a fire for him. The sphinxes sat upon their haunches like grim watchdogs, waiting for a tossed crumb of thought.

He weighed every argument he could bring to bear on Truth to induce her to accept the fortune. In spite of the promise, he ended baffled by an instinctive feeling that she might refuse, even in the face of death. To force her

would seem inhuman. Had he a right to do it? In what possible way could he acquire that right? She was left practically without a guardian, and under age. After Mrs. Dexter's death she would become even more unreasonable. In all probability she would prefer to die also, rather than accept the money. He must save both; act, as it were, for guardian of both, but how?

Slowly the night came in and blurred the outlines of the sphinxes. Craighead himself might have been moulded of bronze, so quiet and stern was his posture.

He was thinking of himself now; of how he had come into this strange situation, and of the second tragic aspect his relation with Orchid had given it. He did not want to go back to Boston to meet *her*. Even his insult of the returned letter might not have been sufficient to unmesh her subtle strategy. He hated her for the faint self-suspicion that he might be entrapped once more. He felt that his safety lay in distance. He would like to stay indefinitely in the South; yes, even to go to Biloxi with the Dexters, to be a son to Mrs. Dexter, a brother to Truth!

But the money! He, a young lawyer, could not afford to leave his business and support these strangers. Neither had he the right to make inroads upon Eugene Dexter's estate. If he were only rich!

A servant summoned him to tea. Truth did not appear, and he sat at the table alone, his thoughts burning on. He had caught a glimpse of a resource so terrific that it frightened him. He proved to himself that it was no question of selling his soul to the devil. It was a double cure, a defence against danger in the North, and a warrant to justify him in alleviating sorrow and penury in the South. It brought Orchid and Truth together in a single picture, and he shrank from the former. It was a Napoleonic piece of strategy that must be decided in a flash of genius.

The night was calm and gentle, as if conscious of the

grief which it might help to soothe. The moonlight flattened itself against the windows, cold and green. Craighead pushed back his heavy chair, and deliberately went in search of Truth.

He found her in the garden, pacing the white driveway, white with the rich February stars above her, and the moon just spurning the tallest pines. His feet crunched the gravel as though it had been snow. She made no sign of recognition as he approached, but, as he reached her side, began to talk softly.

"It's nearly March. The big blue violets are up, and the dogwood-trees are all in bloom. I used to call it fairies' pop-corn. It looks like pop-corn."

Craighead fell into step beside her.

" 'When dogwood's white,
Fishers' delight! ' "

she quoted. "Every first dogwood day we always went." Her voice trembled a little. "We had lots of fishin' nooks we called 'ours.' Nobody else knew about 'em. He loved to fish, an' he always took me. But now — somehow — it don't seem like it was really me that went."

"Poor little girl!" said Craighead, gently, as he took one of her hands in his. He pitied, indeed, but was glad to find her in this chastened mood. She seemed grateful for the pressure of a friendly hand, and allowed hers to remain in his clasp, as they walked along. Much of her shyness had melted in this great crucible of sorrow.

"Truth! You don't dislike me as much as you did at first, do you?"

"No! no! Please don't remember it! I'm sorry now. It was only —"

"Don't mind it a bit! I sha' n't ever think of it again. You have confidence in me now, haven't you?"

"Yes, lots!"

"Now that you have promised to let me act for you and grandma, I have been thinking it all out."

She made no remark, only looked up at him, dumbly.

"We have got to save your grandmother, you and I. We must get her well."

"Yes," said Truth, eagerly, "we must get her well." Then her childish voice trembled. "But, Mr. Craighead, do you know, I've thought — I've been thinking, that maybe she don't *want* to get well. She might be glad to follow — him."

"She must not do that, for your sake, Truth. We must save her in spite of herself. But she has to go to the seaside at once. Could n't you take her if that were the only way?"

"I could try to do anything," said the girl. "I would die for her this minute!"

"That would n't do any good. Perhaps you have got to learn to live for her."

Truth looked at him in wonder. He gazed back with keen eyes.

"Now, Truth, it is necessary for me to tell you something about myself. I know you want me — you need me — to go to Biloxi with you, and I am ready to do so. But I have been thinking whether it is quite right for me to go. You know I am sent down here by others, and I ought to go back and tell them of your grandfather's sad death."

She was gazing into his face with painful intensity. He continued with some embarrassment: —

"Now the trouble is this. I don't like to leave you without money. Indeed, I don't see how you are to go without money. Hotels and doctors are expensive, and your grandfather had nothing to leave you but the farm, — the plantation, I mean. I don't think your grandmother has enough money even to go on living here."

He thought she would be crushed by this announcement, but she seemed, if anything, relieved. She feared death, but not poverty. She had always been used to that.

"But, my poor Truth! I see you don't quite under-

stand. There were a great, great many expenses connected with the funeral, and the money had to come from somewhere. Now your journey is going to cost even more, and I would gladly advance it to you, if I had it. But as you know, even my own expenses here are paid by others, and I have no right —”

Truth drew her hand away in evident doubt and trouble. She did not mistake his delicacy; but mingled feelings of gratitude and resentful pride, and a dim realization of some terrible issue, overcame her.

“Truth,” he went on quickly, rushing to the attack, “I have thought it all over, and there is but one way. You must help me to justify the responsibility I had to take. I came here to help you all, and you rejected me. In spite of that, I couldn’t leave you. Now only one word from you, and I need not leave you at all. I shall have every right to stay on and serve you.”

He leaned forward eagerly, but she had half turned away, with lips set close and eyes upon the ground. This was no place to stop.

“Truth, you must accept your uncle’s money!”

She recoiled a step, and stood staring at him with horrified eyes.

“Take the money!” she gasped. “You don’t mean that! How *dare* you say it! Don’t you know it was thinkin’ of that that killed him?”

This was the issue, as he had foreseen; and now it was a battle of wills.

“Truth, listen! I know all that. I have thought of all that. But you just now said that you would gladly die for your grandmother.”

“And I would!” she cried. “You know I would. But this —!”

“Truth, did you not promise this afternoon to obey me?”

“Anything but this!”

“But this is the only thing possible! You are old enough

to understand me. Listen! If you refuse to decide now, your only remaining guardian—your grandmother—will surely die.” Truth threw out her hands with a stifled cry. “Then you will be forced to decide, in any case; but it will be too late to save her.”

Truth’s desperation cut sheer through his logic.

“Grandma would never say ‘yes,’ even if I did.”

“That is just why we must decide without asking her.”

“But if she is my guardian, *can* I do it without her?”

He had not thought the girl capable of this. It would force him more quickly than he had intended back upon his last line of reserves. But there was one more chance.

“Strictly speaking, no!” he answered slowly and reluctantly. “Unless we have a right to assume that, after your grandmother’s recovery, she will ratify our action. I, for one, do not believe that she could do otherwise.”

“Then would you be glad that we had tricked her while she was sick, and made her do what grandpa did n’t want?”

“Your grandfather never came to a decision.”

“Yes, but you *knew* what he thought about it, and I have already refused twice.”

“That was in mere childish irritation, dear Truth. You are no child now. Suffering and responsibility are making you a woman. And you cannot afford to think of yourself. It is your grandma’s life that concerns us. Just think of her dying for need of proper food and attendance, and you left alone, an orphan, with nothing to pay the interest of the mortgage.”

“I don’t know anything about the mortgage, and I don’t care!” the poor, tortured child broke out. “If mummie dies I’m goin’ to die too, for there’s nothin’ to live for.”

“Do you think your grandpa would want you to die? Don’t you know that it was his dearest wish that you would keep up the old place?”

She did not attempt an answer. She saw no way out but death and death. But she was unconquered.

"Grandma herself would curse me for it," she said at length, as if to herself. "I can't! I just *can't*!"

Craighead became desperate. There was no resource but to throw himself into the breach. It was the crisis of his own life.

"Truth! Truth!"

He came to her, took both of her cold hands in his, and held them as in a vise. She tried to lift her face, but could not. Something in the man's sheer, overpowering will made her tremble.

"Truth, I understand. To accept this money would seem to you a scar upon your grandmother's conscience, a blot upon her honor and your own. I will not urge you further to make that sacrifice. But there is one other way — in which you can let me save you — only one other way. I can think of only one other way!"

Truth looked up in his face at last, startled by his earnestness. Van was embarrassed, and very pale.

"Your grandfather — intended that you should marry. You are under age — your husband would have full right to decide for you. Ought a man to stand passively by, and see the triumph of narrow prejudice, and not lift a hand? Ought he to see wilful murder and suicide?"

Truth trembled piteously. She did not understand the strange words, and the man's expression terrified her.

"Your husband would have a noble, a holy right to save you, — conscience, soul, and body. Whose is the greater sacrifice? You must marry, Truth, — at once!"

"Marry!" repeated the girl, pale and red by turns. "Who would I marry? There is n't anybody!"

"You must marry *me*, Truth!"

If his clasp on her hands strengthened, she did not feel it. Amazement had excluded self-consciousness. She could not believe her ears. Marry Mr. Craighead! Marry a stranger, — a lawyer, — a Yankee! Had Orion jumped down from the constellation above, and walked up the garden path, she could not have been more astounded.

"Do you — do you *mean* it?" she faltered at last.

"From my soul!"

She gave a long, tremulous sigh that was half a sob. "I did n't know — I did n't think that folks could just get married this way — like business. I thought —"

She stopped, blushing in confusion.

"You thought," he said bitterly, "that marriages were all made in heaven, with love as master of ceremonies. I once thought that way myself, but have long ago found out the mistake. People marry for many different reasons, and we have a nobler one than the average in our joint desire to save Mrs. Dexter's life and property. I could n't ask or expect that you would love a crabbed fellow like me, Truth; but at least I can be a good friend to you, and a son to your grandmother. You will merely be giving me a legal right to help you both."

His voice died away. In the silence, a little screech-owl far down in the branch sent up its shrill, curdled warning.

Truth withdrew her hands slowly. This was indeed a responsibility for her to decide. No one, not even the dear grandmother, could lift this burden from her.

"I never knew much about marriages," she said, "except grandma and — him. I reckon that was the kind made in heaven."

Her voice was full of a pathos that was at once childish and womanly.

Craighead was silent. He looked out over the cold, neglected garden. The strained breathing of the girl came to him like tangible pangs of pain. This girl had already, perhaps, dreamed of love as her portion. What right had he to shut her away from that highest form of human happiness? And, for himself, — what did he really know of her? Might she not put him to shame before his Boston friends?

But it was too late to hesitate. His final decision had been made alone, at the supper table. He could not convict himself of sordid motives. It was Truth's one

chance. She seemed to have a noble nature, and a ready wit. With the right to spend her fortune upon her, what might he not make of her? His restless, brilliant mind shot forward into the future, and he saw her improved both in mind and person, sympathetic, congenial, a woman of whom he could be proud. And Orchid! What would she say and think? At least it would justify, — confirm forever, the breach that had opened between them.

He brought his eyes again to Truth, to the strange child that would soon be his wife. "Well, little girl," he said kindly, "what is the answer? You cannot hesitate. The day we are married I shall start with you and your grandmother to the Gulf. There she will soon regain health and strength. If you refuse —"

"Oh, no, I won't hesitate," she began. "I —"

"One moment!" Craighead interrupted. He took her by both slender shoulders, and looked gravely into her face, as he said: —

"Before your final answer, my dear Truth, it is only fair that I should say this. I am a hard-working, serious fellow, nearly twice your age. A bad bargain, I fear! But I promise you that I will accept your confidence as a sacred charge. Were I romantic enough I might tell you that my heart had been charred, and that this, perhaps, makes me crustier than I might otherwise be. But I pledge myself to be a son to Mrs. Dexter, and a true friend to you. However, if, after you come to learn more of the world, you should repent of this hasty step, I shall never attempt to hold you. I shall always consider myself the bound one, and you the free. I believe that is all to be said at present. And now I ask you again — will you marry me?"

Truth did not hang her head this time.

"Yes, Mr. Craighead, I will marry you for grandma's sake. And," here she dropped her eyes, and a tiny flicker of a smile came to her pale lips, "I don't believe that you are *nearly* twice as old as me!"

Craighead laughed brightly. "Well, it is a bargain! Can you be ready by Saturday?"

"Saturday! Why, that's only three days!"

"Mrs. Dexter cannot afford to wait. We shall have to let her know, and we had better go through the form of asking her at once. We will tell her that it is our own agreement, and say nothing about the will. She will not refuse. Shall we go?"

"Yes."

They walked to the house without another word. It was as Van had judged. Mrs. Dexter was calm, sweet, and submissive, too dazed to be astonished or inquisitive. She felt instinctively that it must be right. Earthly interests were still unreal, and the slow, shuddering sobs that she heard from Truth all night might be those of happiness as well as of distress.

CHAPTER VIII

WHO SAID "JEANNE D'ARC"?

THREE days later a strange, pathetic little wedding took place in the big parlor. Mrs. Dexter, arrayed for traveling, had been moved in on cushions. Besides an Episcopal clergyman summoned from the city, Mr. and "Miss" Le Baron were the only guests. A sobbing group of darkies clustered like brown shadows at the far end of the room. Only in old Uncle Norah's eye shone a sort of demoniac joy.

To the humblest consciousness the air was heavy with a sense of tragedy. For the domestics the occasion was like a second funeral, an inevitable and rapid outcome of the first. Mrs. Dexter's dazed white face was the focus of attention, the centre of the doubt and agony of the plot; and all could see how she struggled against her soul's paralysis for a keener recognition of the meaning of it all. Even the cousins realized that it was her thread of life which the principals were so bravely weaving into their new tie.

For Truth the service seemed directed to a vague semblance of herself, bound by a shadowy band to the semblance of a man beside her. In the midst of a final prayer, when she and this haunting man-shadow were made to kneel before an automatic speaker in white robes, there came a faint tap at the window. She almost tortured it into the magic of a reprieve. It was an old-fashioned French window that opened upon a gallery, where one blind had been thrown back; and there, behind the lowest pane of glass, stood an old red rooster gazing

critically into the hushed room. Truth choked down an hysterical laugh. Never, to the end of her life, would she be able to forget the inquisitive gravity of that fowl's expression. She was afterwards wont to declare it the only real part of the ceremony.

Mrs. Le Baron stole many shy glances at Craighead's finely cut features, and was quite overcome to think this lordly being now in a state of transformation into a "Fo'th cousin" to herself. When all was over, she felt it her duty, as the sole female relative present, to go up and kiss him; but she could n't muster the courage, and departed with her husband after a few funereal congratulations. The city minister was more at ease, having been cheered by a glimpse at the bill which the bridegroom had slipped into his hand. There was no attempt at a wedding-breakfast or hospitality of any sort. Truth withdrew at once to her grandmother's couch, while the little company noiselessly dispersed. Norah lingered last of all to whisper mysteriously to Van that the "coach" would be ready in an hour.

During the brief interval since his betrothal Craighead had been working with a Napoleonic mastery of combinations. Not only was the Big House ready to be closed, with the old negro left in charge, not only had trunks, and valises, and shawls been already forwarded to the little station, where the ticket clerk was proudly displaying them to an excited chorus of loafers, but for two days he had been sending despatches North and South, through pine groves and cypress swamps, and along the margin of the warm, white Gulf coast. A corner suite had been engaged at the leading Biloxi hotel, a drawing-room bespoken on the Southern Pacific Flyer from Montgomery, a special parlor-car brought up, for the first time in the history of the branch road, from the latter metropolis to Dexterville, and, more than all, a city coach and horses landed from a freight-car, amid a shower of admiring expletives. The old sleepy village had been gal-

vanized into an excitement such as it had not known since the capture of Mobile. The station clerk would have scorned to change places with the President himself.

When the time for starting came, Mrs. Dexter, lifted out on the arms of Van and Norah, stared bewildered at the shining, varnished equipage drawn up before the door. The strangeness of it all seemed to overcome her, and her head sank wearily to Van's shoulder. As for Truth, it was merely part of a fairy-godmother mystery, bound up with an agony of grief, which itself was growing unreal. Norah had begged from Van, as a final boon, that he might displace the cockaded driver who had been sent from the city livery stable.

"I don' want no fool dood city nigger a-drivin' *my* ole Miss to her own station," he had said. And now, mounting beside the indignant hireling, he seized the reins, and shouted over the side, "Marse Van! Is you all safe inside? Shore you ain't forgotten nothin'? Den, golly! we'se off! Git out de way, you gawpin' niggers, you! Did n't you nebber see a co'ch befo'? Now, jes watch your Uncle Norah drike de fiery chariot!"

And in another instant the old man was jerked to his feet, and his hat sent into the air, as the well-fed steeds, seeing the sweep of a whip out of the corner of their blood-shot eyes, darted down the lane and over the "raid ridge" at a speed which was new to that district of farm horses and plodding mules. It was more than fortunate that Mrs. Dexter had been propped up by many downy cushions.

As she was carried through the waiting-room to her car, the curious crowd withdrew on each side respectfully, and many of the unkempt heads bowed with an instinct of unconscious chivalry before the pale, bereaved lady, who seemed suddenly lifted by this Yankee necromancer to realms of long-lost splendor. Truth walked modestly in the rear, laden with the last hand-baggage, and almost as unnoticed as a lady's maid in her plain black dress. She

was still only "the Colonel's little girl," for her marriage was practically forgotten in the regal ceremonies of despatching a "special Pullman."

When everything was complete, the ladies ensconced in their pleasant car, the last trunk and parcel on board, the engineer alert with his face out of the side window, Van signified to the station-agent that he was ready.

This important functionary, who had got himself up for the occasion in a new bright pink tie, had been parading the platform in a fever of anxious anticipation.

"*L— l-let* her go! Jim!" he exploded.

The greasy machine shrieked in a way it had never dared before; and as the little special slipped down the steep grade beyond the sand-bank, the crowd of spectators rushed to the edge of the platform, and peered along the gleaming metals which sent back telegraphic clicks of its accelerating progress.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned," said the agent, straightening himself up, "ef that blamed Yankee dood ain't got a whole gold-mine in his pants pocket! I reckon Dexterville need n't kick, ef he *has* swiped the girl!"

A simple luncheon had been prepared in the end of the car opposite to where Mrs. Dexter lay. Truth accepted Van's invitation to join him at the table, but she ate almost nothing, and conversation lagged.

The stress of Craighead's planning was over for the moment, and he had leisure to notice the awkwardness with which his wife was trying to swallow her oyster stew. His wife! The thought came with a queer surprise. The wedding had hardly been more to him than a link in the chain of preparations. Since his betrothal he had spoken with Truth only on matters of business. As he now paid her the ordinary attentions of table etiquette, he felt almost as one might feel toward a chance travelling companion of the opposite sex.

Truth could not have told which of the many strange and bewildering occurrences of the last few days she was

thinking of most. She felt that the rooster had understood the situation better than any one else. She kept her eyes fixed in the neighborhood of the salt-cellar.

"I'm — I'm goin' back to grandma, now, Mr. Craighead," she remarked, after a very short *tête-à-tête*. Craighead sprang to assist her from her chair, an attention which confused her greatly.

The change of cars at Montgomery was effected without incident. Craighead retired to the ordinary smoking-car, and sat moodily gazing out as the train sped smoothly down from the foothills into the wide, moist plain that bounds the mighty Gulf. Old gray-beards of Spanish moss began to droop from the limbs of ancient cedars, as if the ghostly relics of a former race still brooded regretfully over its lost possessions. Van felt uneasy and out of place, as he plunged farther and farther into the unknown. On terms however magnificent, and with sentiments however lofty, he seemed to have sold himself to a party of travelling strangers.

Toward evening the train stopped for some moments at the old historic town of Mobile. Craighead caught his first glimpse of its warm, yellow inlet opening into the wide, blue bay. Many barges and sailing vessels lay at the wharves, some unloading fragrant cargoes of pineapple and bananas, others waiting to receive the heaps of plethoric cotton-bales piled at one side of the pier, and destined for direct transportation to Liverpool. Huge "flat-boats" of native coal lay moored in the river, first fruits of the government's engineering improvements in Alabama's sluggish water-ways. Fashionably dressed young ladies promenaded the station platform, their light silk waists and bright parasols drawing attention to the sweet, warm balm of the air, honey-laden, as if blowing from some gigantic greenhouse.

Their soft, low chatter with attendant swains was a language new to Craighead, musical as the murmur of winds among pines, — liquid English, molten, even as

French has run in glittering drops from the disintegrating strata of Latin. This was the kind of dashing, dark-eyed girl he had half hoped to find in Miss Dexter. Recalled now to her existence, he tapped on the car window and summoned her for a stroll. But she looked frightened as she shook her head and withdrew.

It was night when they arrived at Biloxi. The little Queen Anne station with its one electric light was the first bit of modern architecture Craighead had seen since leaving Washington. It would have reminded him of the North, but that it was apparently embowered in orange-trees. A comfortable omnibus conveyed the little party over white, shell-paved streets, between rows of neat villas half-screened in magnolias, until the capacious hotel was reached.

Next morning Mrs. Dexter was examined by the local physician, a young Philadelphian, of whom Craighead had heard good reports. The latter was assured that nothing whatever was needed but rest and careful nursing.

The days hung heavily on Craighead's hands. Truth took her meals in the room with Mrs. Dexter, whom she refused to leave even for a half-hour's exercise. He wandered uneasily through long verandas and billiard-rooms and bowling-alleys, and out over hopeless stretches of monotonous beach, avoiding at night the brilliant drawing-rooms where assembled throngs of well-dressed, listless Northern visitors. Once he thought he recognized a Boston face,—that of a young lady he had met at Mrs. Wiley's. He hoped she had not noticed his name on the register.

"Come out and take a ride in my buggy," said the doctor, one morning, really pitying his loneliness. On the pleasant round through shaded streets he pointed out various historic landmarks.

"Were you aware that, for twenty years, this old town was the capital of a French empire as large as present Europe? Well, it was. The fort stood just over there,

among that clump of live-oaks. Iberville, he was drunk with big ideas! He meant, from this stronghold, to capture all of the Spanish and English possessions, pocketing Florida and Mexico to boot. All for the glory of the Bourbon Dauphin, of course! The first nigger slaves were landed on this beach. Many a gay Paris lady and snuff-boxed lord came over only to rot of yellow fever. Yes, sir, this was to have been the Versailles of America. But the luck fell to New Orleans."

This distraction was, to Craighead, but a desperate resource. He was dying for work and companionship. His Northern energy revolted at the odor of decay and listless invalidism. He could do little for Mrs. Dexter. The doctor had said that she must remain in isolation for a month, at least. He was seized with nostalgia for the North, for winter, for snow, for the Arctic sting of the wind as it reddens the noses of the sleighers on the Charles River.

On the fourth morning he brooded darkly under the trees. The glow of idealization was off the situation. The romance of his life was over. He had heard the lock of his youth click behind him. In the hotel, yonder, was a pale, illiterate girl who was Mrs. Van der Weyde Craighead. He felt as though he had been reading his own obituary in a newspaper. He was inclined to resent being entrapped into this slavery by her idiotic obstinacy and incompetence. Suppose, after all, she did not have it in her to realize the hopes he had builded on her character!

Suppose she remained shy, awkward, and ill-dressed, an impossibility in Boston society, a handicap to all his ambitions! How Orchid would sneer. Orchid! At this thought a deeper bitterness assailed him. Why must all women be either Amelias or Becky Sharps? "Vanity Fair" was one of the few novels Craighead had been able to read with pleasure or appreciation.

"Pshaw!" he muttered. "The strain of the last two

weeks, and now this infernal dawdling, are making me morbid. I must get back to Boston and to work."

As he entered the hotel the office clerk handed him a letter. It contained a telegram from Norton, his junior partner, forwarded from Dexterville.

"Come at once. Deuce to pay with the Simpson case."

The thought of departure made him feverish with excitement. Mrs. Dexter did not need him any longer. He sent a messenger to her room, asking to be allowed to make the ladies a visit, as he had something of importance to say.

Mrs. Dexter was lying, as usual, on a sofa; Truth sitting in a low rocking-chair beside her. The latter rose with an awkward, side-long acknowledgment of his presence, and shuffled toward a window, where she stood looking out. The elder lady received him kindly, but there was the same vague, objective trouble in her small face. Now and again she would turn her eyes from Van to Truth, as though trying to solve a riddle, or confirm a surmise. Her very pathos pleaded with Craighead for something that he would not understand.

"I must start for Boston to-night," he said, at length. "My partner has a difficult case on, and needs me."

Mrs. Dexter was silent for a moment. Thought was not easy to her in her present weakened condition. Then she said gently:—

"I can never be too grateful for all you have done for me. I can't understand it all yet,—my head seems so strange and weak. But I am grateful, and Truth is grateful too, I know." She looked piteously towards Truth's averted face. "Truth is grateful too," she murmured. "We must not keep you."

Still Truth made no sign.

"I shall leave you in the good doctor's care," Craighead went on. "He says you will have to remain here for some weeks yet, and when you wish to go elsewhere, I can come again to the South, if necessary."

Truth moved uneasily. He now addressed her directly.

"You can understand, Miss Dexter, that your estate in Boston needs personal attention." No one of the three noticed the misnomer; but Truth turned from the window, and came toward him with nervous hesitation in her gait.

Craighead rose from his chair. "I will come in again, Mrs. Dexter, just before starting, for a final good-bye. In the mean time, would you care to take a short walk on the beach?"

He was looking at Truth.

"Yes, Truthie," said the old lady with some eagerness. "It will do you worlds of good! Yes, take her to the seashore, Mr. Craighead."

Truth started obediently toward the door, but Mrs. Dexter interrupted. "Take a cloak, darling, — your brown jacket — or, here! maybe this is better, my old black shawl."

"Yes, yes," said the girl, wrapping herself almost lovingly in the sable folds. "I shall never wear anything but black again."

The shawl was so large that a point of fringe touched the floor behind her. They walked along the corridors together. Craighead stiffened as each well-dressed Northern lady stared at them in passing, and turned to look at the uncouthly draped figure with curiosity or disdain. He felt himself humiliated and indignant. He, of all men, to have a wife of whom he could not be proud! But he consoled himself with the thought that she was worth some millions in her own right, a fact which he would like to tell these supercilious guests to their faces.

They went out by a side door, and down a plank walk to the beach in silence. There was no wind. Blue Mississippi Sound hung in the air like a wild morning-glory. It was one of those perfect February days which make of the South a temporary paradise. The sky was but an expanded and diluted stretch of sea, and the long yellow

islands lay between like a chain of gold on a cushion of azure velvet.

The young married strangers paced, side by side, the echoless sand, but Truth's listless step tended to lag a little. Van felt that she was afraid of him and of the coming interview, but some instinct of cruelty, latent in most men, urged him to increase her terror.

"Truth, do you realize that you are my wife?" His voice was like the eye of a dissector. He stopped short to look at her.

"Yes," she said, with expanding nostrils, her gaze riveted on his face like a victim's on that of an executioner.

"U-m-m! Do you regret it?"

She paused before answering. "You said it was the only way to save grandma."

"And haven't you a thought for me?"

"You've been good to us," she said simply. "I don't understand it."

"Most men consider that a wife's affection is some compensation for personal sacrifices."

She did not answer, but looked out to sea and shivered. Had he not said there would be no affection?

"You are not responsive, Mrs. Craighead."

Still she did not reply. "Are you troubled at the thought of going to Boston with me to-night?"

The blow had fallen! She recoiled under it, but rallied almost immediately. "Do you mean that you are goin' to force me to leave grandma?"

"It is a wife's duty to go with her husband," he said sententiously. "Ask Mrs. Dexter if it is n't."

He was almost ashamed of himself as he saw her pallor. She had shut her eyes; he thought she was praying. She was saying to herself, "If only grandpa were here, he would save me!"

He could not deny himself one more question. "Your grandmother will be amply provided with nurses. Do you *refuse to go?*"

"I can do anything that is for her good. Love for her, you said, was to consecrate our strange marriage. It's only a week now, and she is still very sick. If you try to make me leave her now, you were not speaking the truth then. Can you really mean to force me?"

"Oh, certainly, I would never force you to go with me," he said stiffly. He could not have explained to himself the instinct which led him to torment this poor ignorant child. She straightened herself with equal stiffness, as a thought came into her head.

"Don't you remember, you promised I could be free to leave you if I wanted to? Even if you do say that it's a wife's duty to do whatever her husband tells her, you yourself gave me this chance of escape. Grandma needs me more than you, and if I've got to make a choice, I will stay with her!"

She was splendidly graceful as she drew herself up to full height, glad that she would not be forced to beg him for mercy. She stood upon her own rights. Van gazed at her in admiration. As before, the stupid girlhood had vanished in a crisis, — she could be a heroine still. Her flashing eyes looked straight into his. She was a creature worth winning; a great load rolled away from his heart.

The young man threw back his head, held out his hand, and laughed. It was a genial, bright, hearty laugh. Truth stared at him incredulously.

"You're just the fine girl I thought you, Truth. I admire your spirit. I only wanted to draw you out, and see whether all your pluck had been washed away by tears!" He advanced and took her hand. His smile beamed on her warmly, like a sun rising from a misty haze.

"Don't be troubled, little girl!" he went on, in tones that she had never heard before. "I didn't intend to take you away. I must go to Boston alone, and get things in order. When I saw how frightened you were I could

not help teasing you a little. It was cruel, but satisfactory."

His voice was so frank, his tone and grasp so reassuring, that she felt her whole soul expand in a kind of wondering thankfulness. She could not speak at first, and merely turned her quivering face slowly upward to his. Something rose in his throat at the sweet trustfulness of that look. He noticed the delicate beauty of her lips.

"Some day, you know, you may *want* to go with me," he said, with meaning.

"Of course," she hastened to assure him, "but not without grandma."

Van threw back his head and laughed again. "Evidently my domestic affairs are not to be on the commonplace order." Then changing his tone to one of cordial interest, he said, "But now, Truth, this may be our only chance of making friends for a long time. I want to hear what kind of person I've married. Come, tell me all about yourself, — what you have been doing and thinking all these years."

"It *is* a mighty long time," said Truth, solemnly. "It really seems ages and ages ago that I was a little child, — and I was so happy then!" Her face saddened, and she looked out wistfully across the Sound. A venturesome wave, creeping almost to her feet, broke into scallops of sandy foam. She stepped back quickly, with a gesture more of distaste than alarm.

"Let's go back into the woods, if you don't mind! We're too close!" She threw out one hand as though to repel the waves.

"It *is* a bit damp!" remarked the practical Van.

"Oh, I don't mind *that*. It isn't that. Only I don't like the water so near. It is lots prettier from among the trees!" She quickened her steps up the sandy slope.

"You queer little thing! I thought every one liked the

sea. Think how the poets rave over it!" Van smiled. He did not have a great opinion of poets.

They were now in the woods. Truth was ahead, and sprang lightly from root to root. The solid pine-trunks, red-brown close at hand, purple in the distance, enclosed them in great parallels of light and shade. A green velarium of branches spread high above.

Truth turned for a view. The upright strokes of each dark pair of trees, look where she would, formed the setting to a picture at once simple, yet perfect in constructive beauty. One horizontal line, perhaps, of beach or half-diluted horizon,—the noble contour of drifting cloud forms, or sweep of sinuous waves, and, for color, a palpitating, shimmering, translucent harmony of turquoise, azure, and silver lights, playing into one another with subtle interchange of values.

"Just look!" cried the girl, triumphantly. "Did n't I say it would be lots and lots prettier?"

"Ye-e-s," assented her companion. "But it seemed to me fairly decent, even at close quarters!" He gazed out with much condescension into the fantasy of blues.

It was cooler among the trees. Truth drew the old shawl up to her chin as she flung herself down upon a slope of shining pine-needles. Van followed suit on a bed of sweet dried fern. Unconsciously he breathed a long sigh of pleasure; and then his hand went, by instinct, to his cigar case. "May I?" he asked, lifting voice and eyebrows in the direction of Truth.

She laughed brightly. "It does seem *too* funny for anybody to ask *me* if they can smoke. Of course they ask grandma, but that's different."

"You are a married woman now, and must expect to be treated with the dignity that your new position warrants."

She flushed delicately, but her frank eyes did not waver as she said, "That's funnier still! I shall never get used to *that*."

Van laughed with her. He felt himself growing younger

in the geniality of her unabashed girlhood. He had not realized before how superlatively fine an innocent woman's eyes could be; and a great throb of something like self-gratulation rose to his heart.

"But this is n't telling me about your childhood," he cried. "Come now, confess it all! Your occupations, amusements, naughtinesses —"

"And I *was* naughty!" interrupted Truth, tilting her fair head to one side and glancing at him archly. "Oh, so naughty! Once I buried the cat, to play resurrection; and another time I dressed up like a ghost and had the whole quarter in hysterics. I know I oughter have been punished; but, goodness! they — daddy and grandma — did n't know how to scold, much less punish." Her sweet face softened into inexpressible tenderness.

"Your own parents died when you were very young, I presume?"

"Oh, yes, when I was a little bit o' baby. They died of yellow fever in Mobile, and then daddy brought me here, — no, I mean to the Big House. I have never really missed them, but at the time it nearly killed daddy and grandma. Papa was their only child."

"Have you ever been to school?"

"N-o-o. Not to a real school. There was n't any except one for the little niggers at Melvin. But daddy and grandma taught me every day."

"What? — if I may ask."

"Well, daddy, he taught me latin and arithmetic, and moral philosophy, and grammar, — oh, I did *hate* grammar!"

"So I should have judged," thought Van, but he was smiling.

"Grandma, she taught me readin' and writin' and geography and history. As soon as I knew how, she made me read out loud an hour every day; and daddy read to us both at night."

"What books, for instance?"

"Well, it was mostly 'Paradise Lost,' and 'Lalla Rookh,' and English history. We all love poetry. On Sundays we read the Bible, and Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and they let me look at the pictures and ask questions about them. Daddy knew just everything!"

Van bent his dark head over his cigar. "Those were all good books; indeed, they are classics," he managed to say gravely. "Were those all?"

Truth clasped long arms about her knees, and rocked thoughtfully to and fro for a moment.

"No, there was one more, — Fox's 'Book of Martyrs.' I didn't like the martyrs much; they used to give me the nightmare. Once I blistered my finger awfully, tryin' to hold it in a candle like Bishop Latimer and Ridley. I loved 'Pilgrim's Progress,' though. I had lots of places in the woods named for places in his journey. I got nearly drowned twice in the Branch, tryin' to cross the Slough of Despond." Her tone fell suddenly. "I reckon it was not a sure-enough swamp that Christian crossed. I know now that he meant — just — *trouble!*"

"Did n't you sometimes read regular novels?" asked Van, quickly. He would not give her time to enter her "sure-enough" slough again.

The stratagem was successful. Truth arched her neck like a young swan, as she answered primly, "Grandma says that novels ain't proper readin' for young girls."

"How about fairy-tales?"

"Fairy-stories, — do you mean? Oh, those! I've read hundreds and hundreds of those. I lived in them. I believe in fairies yet. They used to come to me when I was half-asleep in the woods, and whisper to me their own stories, lots prettier than the ones in books. But when I woke up, just *tremblin'* with listenin', all had gone out of my head, an' I could hear the mean little fairies laugh as they flew away. Sometimes I even thought I could see them hurryin' off on butterflies and mosquito-hawks, and I know I've seen their little heels dive under ferns and

low-bush huckleberries. But was n't it mean for them to run off like that?"

She appealed to him with irresistible, childish coquetry. Her deep eyes were half veiled by lashes, her head tilted sidewise, her exquisite lips parted in pretty displeasure. As for her voice, — it had the richness of honey that the wild bees cull from unploughed moors and plains.

Van leaned forward on his elbow. "I wish you would tell me one of those stories."

At his look Truth flushed more warmly than before. She moved restlessly, and was plainly ill at ease, though she answered lightly enough, "They all flew off on butterflies, I told you."

"Did you never remember any of the whispers?"

"Only little scraps. But even those used to make the piccaninnies gather around me. I could make those children laugh, or fight, or cry, just as I pleased. But that was a long, long time ago. I'm too old for fairy-stories now, I reckon. Besides, —" here she swept him a marvellous glance, the essence of shyness, innocence, and coquetry in one, — "I'm a mar—ried woman now, you know."

Van actually caught his breath. His cheeks were as red as hers. What had he married? a woman? a child? a hamadryad? "Truth," he began, but she was off like a startled deer that has caught a glimpse of its own face in the water.

Some impulse of delicacy kept him from following. He remained passive among the fragrant ferns until she came back, the old shawl high about her chin, and the pretty flush gone. She sat down a little farther off than before.

Van cast about in his mind for some commonplace topic of conversation. "Is this your first visit to the seacoast?"

"Yes. I did n't know that I was goin' to hate it so."

"Hate it," he echoed. "That's queer! Why do you hate it?"

The girl set her face toward the sea. Her eyes seemed to brighten and darken again, as waves take on light and shade in moving.

"It has always kind o' haunted me, ever since I was a baby. I used to dream about things in the bottom of the ocean, and I didn't like them. I knew just how the little Sea Maid felt about stayin' there. You remember the little Sea Maid, don't you?"

"I'm afraid that I have never met her."

Truth looked disappointed. Yet how could she expect a knowledge of her world from such a grave and dignified personage?

"Well, there *was* a Sea Maid and I loved her best. I always wanted to see a real ocean for her sake."

"Ah," interrupted Van. "You can't know what a real ocean is until you come North. Where the whole Atlantic beats off boulders from our granite cliffs, — there you shall smell the true saltness of the world! And, Truth, on some one of those high crags, I am going to build a little summer home for you. Then I shall come to get you, and you shall tell me fairy-stories the rest of my life."

His words shattered the spell of dreams. The thought of living in the North as this man's wife was thrust back upon her, as returning tides force again and again to the shore their waifs of wreckage. She rose slowly to her feet, and stood looking far out beyond the line of islands. Her eyes were full of trouble.

"Surely the sea is beautiful to look at," said Van.

"Yes, it's beautiful, and more awful than I thought," she answered in a low tone. "There is something underneath the water that I am afraid of. It laughs and *pretends* to play at the edges, but out there, in the deep part, it don't laugh! Somehow it almost makes fun of you for tryin' to be good!" She turned from the sea to her

listener. A hint of tragedy was in her voice. "When you talk about my goin' to Boston — I feel just the same kind of terror. I cannot tell what it is, but I feel it!"

Out of the swart folds of the old shawl, her noble head rose finely. Her hair, shredded by the sunlight, formed a halo of brightness. A strange light was in her eyes. Suddenly this faded. She gave a pathetic little sigh, and, leaning close against the tree where she stood, said aloud:

"I am afraid of the sea, but oh, I love woods and trees! They belong to you, somehow. They understand, and you can trust them. When I listen to the sound of trees I feel just like —"

She paused again. Unnoticed, the shawl had slipped to the ground. Her slender body was poised like a water-plant. Her left arm was thrown out across the bole of the tree, and her uplifted face threw glances of mysterious intelligence among the thickly chorused oracles of the branches.

So posed, her aspect thrilled Van strangely. He had seen that face before! But where? a flash of recognition pierced the uncertainty. It was in a picture! Yes, she might have been the model for Lepage's —

"Jeanne d'Arc!" whispered something.

Van fairly jumped. He sprang to his feet and stared hard into her face. Good heavens! Was she a mind reader?

"What did you say?" he asked aloud. "I did n't quite catch on."

"I only said that the trees made me feel like Jeanne d'Arc," she answered, as if a little ashamed. "I thought of it just before I said it, but I was afraid you would laugh at me. Did n't you ever hear about Jeanne d'Arc listening to the voices?" She thought that he would rank Jeanne with the little Sea Maid, and might possibly condemn her childish love of both.

Van stepped forward quickly, and, scarcely knowing what he did, took one of her hands in his.

"Yes, I've read of her," he said. "I believe you look exactly like her. Some day I will take you to New York, and show you her picture."

He kept her hand in his, as they walked back along the beach. She did not meet his eyes again, and he felt the slim fingers within his own tremble more than once. She was growing fast into consciousness of her womanhood.

"Think of me always as your friend and confidant, Truth!" he said, in parting from her. "I fear that I am too old and prosaic for a knight, but my little country girl has indeed become a fairy princess. There is nothing left for me but to become the dragon, and so go North to guard her castles and palaces."

Truth's head drooped still lower. Was it fancy, or did her hand press his?

"You are *not* a dragon," she whispered shyly. "You are a real knight, good and true and — handsome. I like you better than castles and palaces. I — I wish you wouldn't go!"

Before Craighead could recover from his astonishment she was in the house. He pulled out his watch.

"By George, the train starts in an hour. I rather wish I had n't decided to go in such a hurry!"

CHAPTER IX

AT BAY

THAT night, on the train, as Craighead lay contentedly jogged and jolted by the familiar motions of the sleeping-berth, the crowded episode of his Southern journey passed before him in vivid review. His impressions on the trip down, his reception at the Big House, the scene in the library, the Colonel's terrible death, his own overpowering impulse to marry Truth, the phantom wedding, Biloxi, with its days of vacancy, and, lastly, Truth, as she was that afternoon on the beach, her blond head tilted, her soft, rich voice drawling out, "I'm a *mar* — ried woman now, you know." He had only begun to guess at the sweetness of this wild-flower.

But on the next day, as he sped into the region of corn-stalks and red gullies, the visions receded into vagueness, like the early chapters of a book we have just finished. At Charlotte he became conscious of crossing a line of demarcation between two moral jurisdictions. The North and the future wrapped him in a native atmosphere of reality which stifled his recent dreams. The letter-box in the station seemed an accomplice. The towns of southern Virginia forced a resumption of his analysis of Orchid, but in reverse order, like a phonograph set retrograde; the keenness of his former thought had scarred itself indelibly upon the very wax of the air.

Although he felt himself practically impregnable behind his new shield of matrimony, it was impossible for him to refrain from speculation over Orchid's next move. Such women do not take insults tamely, and the return of the torn letter was nothing less than an insult.

"She richly deserved it," he muttered to himself; but even as he said it he knew that justice or desert would play little part in Orchid's plan of action. He deliberately set himself to weigh the chances of her dropping the affair altogether. That would be the only true solution. Yet, what a moment it might be, in which, with his own lips, he should tell her of his marriage!

The vision of Long Island Sound was an arctic travesty upon the azure of Biloxi's shore. The fences and gardens of Connecticut squared painfully sharp, as if set and polished by machinery. Black junipers stood sentinel among the dumped gray boulders of Laurentian granite.

"Boston!"

The well-known Providence Station loomed positively palatial to the returning traveller. The vista of the Public Garden through the narrow framing of Church Street, the objurgations of rival cab-drivers, the long line of electric cars crawling about the corner of Charles like a migration of saturnian ants, and the tireless current of unconcerned humanity pouring through the channel of Boylston, — all combined to thrill him with a returning sense of vitality and power. The very slush of the soiled snow was inspiring, and the keen wind, as he mounted to his lodgings on Beacon Hill, hailed him with the familiarity of old comradeship.

When his hand-bags had arrived, he hurried down the eastern slope of the hill, past that shapeless architectural saurian, the new law courts, whose bones will surely puzzle some future paleontologist, — beneath the toppling Juggernaut of the Ames Building, until, striking the corner of Milk Street, he darted into a great terraced pueblo, of whose crowded cells his office made one. He was fairly excited; he felt himself being unmarried at every step. The elevator greeted him with the familiar smell of tobacco and old boots; the cross-eyed elevator boy leered a respectful welcome. A jerk at the sixth floor, and Craighead had stepped out, rushed across the hall-

way, and flung open the door of No. 235 without a knock.

The one occupant of the room brought his heels to the floor with a bang. It was Norton, the junior partner, who had been tilting far back in Van's desk-chair, his feet some inches higher than his head, as he read, with engrossing interest, a copy of the latest "Sporting Gazette." Simultaneously with the bang, he had pitched his cigar into a corner, and now, straightening his back indignantly, turned to annihilate the unceremonious intruder. On seeing Van he relaxed all at once, fighting as he did so a genial grin.

"Well!" he cried. "Got back, have you? I began to think you had run off with that last whopping check. What's been the matter, anyway? Could n't call you up at any price!"

"I was travelling about," answered Craighead, evasively. "The South is a very interesting country."

Norton, still seated, surveyed his delinquent partner with curiosity and suspicion.

"A little jaunt, — ey? Think I'd like a vacation myself."

"Hump!" said Van.

"You left me a fearful job with Simpson. I'm worked to skin and bone!"

"You look it! You've got queer illustrations there for a law report!" said Van, with a sarcastic glance at the paper. "But — I wrote you, Quin — I've been having a devil of a time myself."

"Oh, yes; I remember. Old chump broke his neck! Hope he took the money first."

No answer.

"Did he?"

"No."

"Then it goes to the girl, direct. Will she have any trouble in getting it?"

"There need be little difficulty," said Van, stiffly.

The keen young eyes grew keener. Something was up with Van, and he knew it. Craighead tried to look nonchalant as he hung his hat and coat on a peg behind the door. Norton followed every motion.

"Whew!" he cried. "A cool three million if it's a cent! Ravishing Southern heiress! Bride from the Bush,—no, I mean the Swamp! Give us the tip, Van, old boy! How's the girl?"

"She's a Southern lady, and your client. I think you had better speak more respectfully of her."

"Oh, certainly," said Norton, apologetically, but with beaming eyes. "I did n't know she was such a tender topic!"

"Will you stop that rot?" growled Van. "I want to talk business."

"This is business,—the biggest sort! Just send *me* down next time!" Norton smacked his lips in a peculiarly irritating way.

"She has accepted the bequest. That's all there is about it!"

"Of course she has accepted. You did n't expect her to refuse, did you? Now the next question is,—who'll she get to spend it for her? When does the next train leave?" He began pulling things about in great excitement, jammed his hat down over his eyes, seized an umbrella, stuffed pens, sponges, and various desk-furnishings into his pockets, and was making for the door, when Craighead caught his arm, flung him half-way across the room, and roared,—

"Don't be an ass! I've married her."

A crash of silence followed. The big books on the shelves nudged one another. After a struggle for breath, the junior partner gasped out,—

"Well! I'm—blessed!"

Craighead sat down to his desk and began opening unforwarded letters. Norton's eyes never left him. His boyish face had the shrewd look of an old man. After a

few moments more of intense regard, he silently picked up his scattered paraphernalia, and left the room.

The next morning, early, Craighead sat alone in his office, writing. The problem of announcing his marriage to his father proved a troublesome one. He could see the hard old abolitionist's face tortured into contemptuous wrinkles. The scowl of effort was on his own countenance when the door flew open, and Norton's rotund visage beamed upon him from the halo of a huge wreath of artificial orange-blossoms, tied with red ribbon.

Van had hard work to control the nervous twitches at the corners of his mouth. He flung the offering toward the waste-paper basket, and, with as much severity as he could command, said, —

"Now, look here, Quin! Let me tell you, once for all, that this is no matter for jokes."

Norton instantly became serious, all but his eyes, which twinkled from the assumed gravity, like those of a chipmunk from a crack in a wall.

"I intended reporting to you in some detail, — but if you have gone back to your Sophomore days —" He made a gesture of disgust in the direction of the wretched object now hanging dejectedly from one ear of the basket.

"Never mind my little tribute of affection," said the other, meekly. "I'm as solemn as a beadle."

Thus reassured, Craighead began. "Now I don't expect to be judged fairly in this marriage." His tone was pugnacious. "All Boston will presume that I married Miss Dexter for her money."

"Well, did n't you?" asked Norton, innocently. "You're not given to emotional vagaries."

Van set keen eyes upon his interlocutor. Perhaps he realized at this moment that other things than chipmunks may be hidden in blank walls.

"If that's not another joke, I'll tell you the facts. Literally, Miss Dexter's reluctance to take the money would

yield to nothing less than a husband's authority, and I had to marry her to keep her and Mrs. Dexter from starvation."

Norton's face was a study. "The Good Samaritan was n't in it!" he murmured, as if to himself.

"It is the unvarnished truth, for all that," Craighead declared; and then went on to give a clear, forcible, and plausible presentation of the circumstances which led up to his marriage. Orchid's name was, of course, not mentioned.

When the story was finished Norton drew a long breath. "It is a wild plot!" he said. Then he got up and grasped Van's hand. "You're a d—d good chap, Van, and a lucky one. I envy you! And you're half in love with the mother-in-law, too, — that makes it wilder still! Is she pretty, Van?"

"Which?" asked Van, smiling.

"Oh, the girl! — Beg pardon! I mean — Mrs. Craighead."

Van reflected with a proprietary air. "No, I can't say that she is exactly pretty. She's hardly more than a child, you know. Yet I don't think that you would call her plain."

"I'll bet a hat I wouldn't!" chuckled Norton. "But when are you going to bring her to Boston? I'm dying to see her! And where are you going to live? Build a palace on the Fens?"

"Can't say yet. You're going to have a lively time helping me run the estate, though," replied Van, thoughtfully. "We had better sell out all the house property, and concentrate on business blocks."

Norton paid no attention. He seemed to be in a brown study.

"There's a vacant lot on Commonwealth Avenue, just back of Mrs. Wiley's."

Craighead began to take on an angry red, but before he could speak, a little tap was heard on the door, repeated after a short interval. Norton edged toward the sound,

opened the door by the cautious measure of a foot, and peeped out.

"Why, good-morning, Quincy. Is Mr. Craighead in?" A faint odor of incense stealing through the aperture turned Van ashen.

Norton retreated, almost shutting the door in the lady's face. His countenance was distorted into an agonized pantomime of horror, and he waved his left hand frantically toward Van, as if imploring that rigid piece of marble to stow itself away under the desk. Van leaned over quickly, and threw the wreath behind a bookcase. Taking this for a signal, Norton collected himself, stepped around in front of the crack with an easy swagger, opened his eyes and the door wide, and exclaimed with the most innocent astonishment, "Why, my dear Mrs. Wiley! Is that you? Van told me to excuse him to all visitors this morning, but I know that he will be beside himself to see *you!*"

"You hypocrite! You knew perfectly who it was," she laughed. "But I forgive you! Where's Van?"

She entered the office in an almost visible halo of perfume, Norton keeping himself directly in front of her. Suddenly he wheeled about on the pivot of one leg, made a low, mocking bow, and, as he went out of the door, grinned in a maddening way, and threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

Then the door slammed. Before the echo had shuddered away, Orchid turned to Van, her face tender, pleading, quizzical, humorous, defiant,—all in one; but the look was lost. Van stood like a bronze image beside his desk, his eyes fixed on a space of wall just over the intruder's pretty head.

Her tactics changed instantly; she began to flutter about the room like an inquisitive butterfly.

"And this is your office! What a dear, quaint, ugly little room! To think that this is the first time I've ever been in it!"

No response.

She stopped beside some bookshelves, and ran her fingers daintily across the fluted dado of bound law reports. "I ought to have married a lawyer," she cried. "I love the very smell and touch of these old tomes."

Still no reply! She glanced at him sidewise, and went on in the same light manner:—

"You are not very polite this morning, *mon ami*. Has anything gone wrong? You don't even offer me a chair. Well, I can find one for myself."

Now of this particular kind of furniture the office possessed but few specimens. There was Van's revolving desk-chair, a similar one for Norton, two battered stools, and, far off in one corner, a dingy divan. Orchid hesitated between these, then, poising for a moment beside the first, suddenly took possession of it, remarking, with a sigh of satisfaction, "I think this just about suits me! It's as good as a merry-go-round."

Van was routed for the instant. He flushed, walked about uneasily for a few turns, then said abruptly:—

"Really, Mrs. Wiley, if you will be so kind as to excuse me this morning — I am overwhelmed with work already too long postponed."

Orchid startled him by a merry, genuine laugh. "Good heavens!" she cried. "Here's a potato on your desk, stuck full of pens!" She held it up by a thick, black penholder.

Van's face remained bronze, but his soul was troubled. Every man knows the agony of seeing a female relative busy herself with his special belongings, but of all persons to have taken possession of his desk,—Orchid! The deeds of Truth's property were lying open at her elbow, and his letter to his father, under her very eyes. How dared she come after all that had passed? He was more than indignant that she should have surprised him into a forced interview. As though guessing the first half of his thoughts, she took up the newly written letter-pad, and turned it face downward upon the desk. Then, with

elbows planted upon it, and her pink chin upon her little gloved fists, she let her merry eyes rest full upon Craig-head's sullen face.

"You might just as well let me have my say and be done with it. This is your only chance of escape. You can't have a policeman eject me, you know!"

"I can leave the room," he said shortly.

"Oh, no! You won't do that. There are too many important letters and papers here." She tapped Truth's documents. "Besides, Quincy could entertain me until your return."

Van was baffled. She was using the privilege of her sex with the mastery of a man. His eyes darkened with anger as he looked at her.

"Explain the purpose of your visit, then. But kindly make the interview as brief as possible."

"You are called a gentleman! Why did you return my letter in halves?"

Van's nostrils whitened. Her audacity was almost splendid.

"You had had your trial and failed in it. I wished to be done with you."

Orchid's cheeks grew a little less pink, and her eyes narrowed ominously. "And do you flatter yourself that you *are* done with me?"

"I am convinced of that fact."

She drew a long sigh, straightened herself back in the chair, and stared out of the window a moment before she said: —

"I came prepared to forgive your suspicious and ungenerous forcing of a half-promise —"

"I do not desire your generosity."

"Nor my friendship, I presume."

"Nor your friendship."

"Thank you for making your position so clear. Now may I ask what you consider sufficient reason to justify it?"

"There is no necessity for my giving reasons."

"But there *is* necessity, I tell you!" The hardly subdued fire began to burn in her eyes. Her hair seemed to grow more vivid, her face to harden beneath its covering of pink flesh.

"I demand explanation, and if you refuse, Tom Wiley shall obtain it for me!"

Craighead sprang to his feet.

"I tell you, Orchid, that I am not going to be bullied by you or any one else into listening to a melodramatic, garbled account of my own conduct and motives! I am my own conscience keeper, and am accountable to no one. I have not the time to-day, nor the inclination, for such an interview as this!"

Orchid had risen too. Her face was like white flint, out of which is struck sparks of fire, for eyes. "Are you not accountable to me for the cowardice, the dishonor of the test you tried to force?"

"It was the only way to — know!"

"To know, — what?"

"Whether you were an actress or a heroine."

"What gives you the right to set up an arbitrary test, by which I am to be judged to all eternity?"

"You yourself, in your promise."

She winced a little. "It was not exactly a promise. You carried me off my feet."

"We cannot go into that now. I took it for a promise. And you, I could swear, meant it so at the time, though I must confess that it accorded ill with your *soubrette* performance a moment later."

"Van, isn't that the whole difficulty now? Isn't it anger, — pique, — at the position in which you were placed? It was dreadful, I know. But you must have seen what an hysterical effort it was to me!"

Craighead believed himself to be a just man. He now considered her words carefully before answering. "Perhaps that incident has had undue weight. Any one in my place would have been equally indignant. But, in

reality, it had nothing to do with the issue at stake. Already I had begun to regret the tempestuous scene which made such a test seem necessary. Let me tell you now that, no matter what your answer, the final result must have been the same."

"And that?"

"Renunciation!"

Orchid shivered. "Then you did n't mean — you never meant —?"

"To wrong Tom Wiley?" the other completed. "No, before God, I did not. It was only to see whether you were really capable of sacrifice."

Orchid leaned back and covered her face with her hands. "It is a death-blow to my vanity," she murmured, "but life to my soul."

Craighead remained standing. In the painful silence they could hear the clang of cars, and the warning shouts of police in the crowded thoroughfares below. It seemed to the young man that this was all part of the same troubled unreality that had fastened upon him in the South. If the past month could only be blotted out for all time! He had not courted romance or theatrical situations; why should they dog him?

Orchid removed her hands and looked up. In her eyes there was an expression he had never seen there before. Her voice, too, was changed. It might have been a ghost of Mrs. Dexter's girlhood that whispered, "I have not understood you, Van. I will not mistake again. But perhaps I have not failed as utterly as you think. Did you read my letter?"

"No."

"Ah! I knew that you could not have read it! But let that pass. I can regain your confidence, and, in the mean time will gladly suffer your misapprehension, knowing it to be but a preliminary to a better and closer friendship. Already, as I have foretold, people have forgotten their gossip —"

Craighead interrupted her hastily. "No, no! It may all be as you say! But we can never return to the old footing. The past is irrevocable."

"Irrevocable! I don't understand. How can that be, if I forgive?"

He opened his lips to tell her of his marriage, but the words refused to come. This statement must give the lie to what he had been saying. She would have but one motive to assign. She could not judge fairly. Yet it must be told, sooner or later. Why not now, and have it done with?

Orchid had broken into impetuous pleading. At first he scarcely heard her words, but then their meaning came, and grew, accumulating with each quiver of her voice, each passionate intonation of her complete surrender.

"Van — Van — don't say that it is irrevocable! I cannot bear it just now, just when I have found in a suspected lover the noblest of friends. I have so many to flatter, to fawn, to deceive. You alone are true. I don't care how the old women gossip! What you said that last wonderful evening burned into my soul, — almost maddened me! Every word of your denunciation was deserved, and I felt each word like a — knout! No one has ever told me of my faults before. You know my people —" She threw out her arms with a gesture of despair, and challenged his pity with burning eyes.

"Yes, I know," he answered gently, "yet —"

"Yet you will take from me the one chance of neutralizing their influence, and strengthening what I have of strength. I am pleading with you for more than life, Van. The best part of me clamors, —

'All I might never be,
All men ignored in me —'

She was growing a little hysterical. "Forget all that I said that evening, except," here her voice lowered to more

vibrating sweetness, "except where the memory might serve to make you gentler. Ah, Van! Do not leave me. Do not give me up! Let me be your client. Listen! I engage you now, from this moment, as my moral and intellectual adviser." She laughed wildly. "Name your own terms, my lord! I shall not blench!"

Van struck his clenched fist on the table. His face had grown whiter than hers. "Orchid! Mrs. Wiley! I cannot listen to you! I must not! Heavens! Why should you torture us both? You don't understand! I am —"

"I don't want to understand," she cried desperately. "Or, perhaps it is that I understand better than you. Van, I will give up all those silly flatterers that swarm about me. I really care nothing for social leadership. I will study under you. I will not even ask that you visit me as often as formerly. Only give me the right to feel that I have your strong will to guide me. I need such help. Don't you know that I need it? More than once, in dark hours, I have been to noted clergymen to beg for comfort and advice. They were polite enough, and meant to be sympathetic, as they doled me out their little sugar-coated commonplaces. But I — I dashed the wretched semblances to the ground and pleaded for real things. Then they would become embarrassed, and their little stock of comfort fail. One nice little man I frightened half out of his senses. He dodges me yet." She gave the same pathetic, hysterical laugh. "Oh, Van, I am starving! Be generous enough to overlook what you think my failure, and help me rise to that first ideal you had of me."

Fairly at bay now, Craighead lifted his haggard eyes full to her own. There was something in his face that gave her occult cognizance of some coming blow. "Orchid!" he cried. She shivered, and clutched her hands together.

"You have pleaded well. God knows that I have suffered under it as much as you; but, the future is no longer

mine. There is a third factor, and this is the real wedge that is to divide us."

Orchid stared at him. Her gray lips moved spasmodically. She seemed voiceless to beseech him not to prolong her agony.

Craighead flung himself down on one of the wooden stools, and bowed his head with a groan. Where was his triumph now? Cursed, spiteful, sentimental, short-sighted fool that he had been! Merciless butcher, in that he must slay this quivering soul before him!

"Yes, a wedge," he repeated. "I am — married!"

The man's head went down, and the silence seemed like that of death itself. After a long, long pause, he heard a strange voice saying, "I don't believe you. I won't believe it! This is another test, or else a low revenge. You the impersonal one, the honorable! What a lie to your words this thing, if true, would give! Oh, Van, be merciful! Say that it is only another test!"

He raised his face and looked at her in absolute silence.

All at once her expression began to change. Her figure stiffened, and her head, with its little bonnet of glittering jet, grew erect. Her splendid eyes cooled, and her mouth straightened itself into the semblance of a smile, with tiny dimples of disdain at the corners. Van was too much occupied with his own bitter thoughts to observe this transformation, but he stared, like a dupe, when the words came.

"Forgive my surprise, dear Mr. Craighead. I was, just at first, a little taken off my guard. This, as you say, introduces a third factor, and, for the present, I must take my soul-yearnings elsewhere. What an impulsive, undisciplined creature I am, to be sure!" She laughed aloud, and Van recognized the old society ring. He attempted to speak, but she gave him no time.

"Well, it is over now," she said, as if in relief. "Let us agree to forget it. Mr. Craighead, — or rather, my

dear old friend Van, — I offer you my sincerest congratulations!"

He took the outstretched hand mechanically. It was all part of the nightmare.

"And now tell me something of Mrs. Craighead. Of course she is beautiful and poor. All Southern heroines are beautiful and poor!"

"Then you must count her as the exception. She is neither."

"Ah-h-h!" said Orchid, as if in consternation; but, regaining her brightness, cried: "I wish to judge of her beauty for myself. You are too modest. Where is she stopping? I shall call at once."

"Orchid," began Van in a troubled voice, "do you think it for the best? Had not the breach between us better be consummated here and now, forever?"

By the triumphant flash of her eyes he saw that he had made a tactical error.

"Why, you selfish thing!" she laughed. "Am I to lose my teacher and the chance of a new and delightful friend, all in one blow? Of *course* I am going to call. Tell me where she is, instantly!"

"She is at present in the South, with a sick grandmother." In spite of supreme effort Van flushed as he said the words.

"Ah-h-b-h!" murmured Orchid again, and this time her pause seemed a deliberate insult.

"May — er — may — I ask when she is expected?" said the lady, in a tone that expressed her knowledge of the delicate ground where she trod.

"Really, Mrs. Wiley, I do not see that my domestic affairs can possess any special interest for you. Mrs. Craighead will join me in Boston as soon as her grandmother is able to be left alone. The circumstances attending my hasty marriage were all of an unusual character."

Orchid made a gurgling sound in her throat, and im-

mediately suppressed it behind her handkerchief. Van scowled, and continued gruffly: "There is important business connected with Mrs. Craighead's Boston property which must be attended to immediately. I am overwhelmed with work."

"Oh, I'm going at once, — at once!" she laughed, beginning to fasten the silver clasps of her cloak. "Good-bye! It was more than kind of you to give me so much of your valuable time, especially under the circumstances. I can't tell you how much I appreciate the privilege of being the first, the very first, to congratulate you on your new-found happiness. Everything is clear now! Do you — er — shall I keep it secret for the present?"

"Certainly not," he answered angrily. "It was in all the Southern papers two weeks ago."

"Oh, how delightful, that I shall be allowed to speak of your good fortune to others! And it is invested in Boston real estate, you say?"

By this they had reached the door. Orchid paused for another congratulatory hand-grasp. Upon the threshold she stopped again, and, lifting big, innocent eyes, said confidentially, "Van, there is just one more question I want to ask. Don't think me rude. But your people, you told me, were such *intense* abolitionists —! Is — er — your bride — *white*?"

When Norton returned he found books, chairs, and rugs lying about in attitudes that suggested the visit of a small cyclone.

"Regular scapping match, by George!" he said under his breath. "I wonder if any hair is lying around. What did you say to her, Van? She danced through the hall smiling like a triumphant Circe."

A muffled and thunderous murmur came from the region of Van's desk.

"Beg pardon! I didn't quite catch on to your remark."

No reply.

Norton seated himself leisurely, and said, in an impressively lowered tone:—

“Van, old boy, you’d better look out for that woman. She means business!”

Van looked up.

“Did you say that Simpson’s receivership dated from the first of January?”

CHAPTER X

A BELATED HONEYMOON

FOR the next three weeks Craighead was up to his ears in work, and would scarcely have thought of Truth at all had not the necessity of transferring her property forced his attention upon the problem of their future relations. Letters beginning "Dear Mr. Craighead" came from her at irregular intervals. She wrote, in her large, round, childish hand, of her grandmother's slow but unmistakable recovery, and of their ever-increasing desire to get back to the quiet old Alabama homestead. In return he sent them money, and minute responses to their requests for advice. Evidently the two women had begun to look to him as an infallible guide in mundane affairs. Meanwhile, all papers relating to the testamentary disposition of the estate of the late Mr. Eugene Dexter had been handed over to Van by the executor, Judge Adams, who apparently regarded the matrimonial venture of the young lawyer as a clever piece of business. The document sent to Truth for signature came back subscribed in very precise chirography, "Truth Dexter."

A stage in the negotiations was finally reached where, in Van's judgment, his wife's presence was indispensable; and he communicated this fact with delicacy both to Truth and Mrs. Dexter. There was a more personal motive for wishing her to come; that of freeing himself from the awkward position of a brideless groom. He knew that people were beginning to whisper. People always did! The thought of Orchid was a burning scar.

His last letter to Truth met with no response. Mrs. Dexter's answer was as follows:—

VALUED FRIEND, — In this, the first letter which I have been able to write you, I must begin by tendering my heart-felt thanks for your many great kindnesses to my granddaughter and myself at the time of our recent terrible bereavement. My health being now much improved, I am filled, day by day, with deeper longings for that dear old home which will welcome me with such a host of blessed memories, the home where my bridal days were spent, and where my long married life came to its sudden pause. I have been talking very seriously with Truth concerning this new state of matrimony into which it has pleased God to call her; and I think I can now assure you that she will not be unwilling to accompany you to your Northern home. As is most natural under the circumstances, she is much concerned at the thought of so great a change, and somewhat overcome by maiden timidity. I fear that I scarcely realized, in my own selfish grief, the importance of the step my little girl was taking. With regard to the other matter, that which brought you to our quiet home, — I have no power or desire to understand it. I am in God's hands, and to Him I trust my darling's future. Do not think that I mean to imply that what you did was not for the best. I trust you entirely. How could I do otherwise when I reflect upon the noble generosity which led you to assume the care and responsibility of two helpless women? May you never have cause to regret it!

Truth is a dear, good child, somewhat boisterous at times, and a little wayward; but she has fine instincts and generous impulses. And now, my dear Mr. Craighead, I feel urged by conscience to touch upon a very delicate subject. I have read that, in many of the Northern cities, forms of religious worship are sadly changing, and that prayer is no longer considered a staff on which the soul must daily lean. I feel sure that you cannot belong to this class of erring ones, and that you and Truth will kneel together night and morning, as I shall kneel here, alone, to invoke from our loving Father protection and help in the vicissitudes of this mortal life. That God may keep you both, shower upon you His richest blessings, and at last lead you into the haven of His Kingdom, is the earnest wish of

Your obedient servant,

DOROTHY SPOTSWOOD DEXTER.

Van read this letter through with a smile that was at times humorous, and again tender. "Sweet old soul!" he murmured to himself. "It is something to have won the confidence of a woman like that. But I hope she won't try to put me through my catechism when I go down after Truth." Even at the moment, however, he felt that she would never broach the subject again to him, and he was not mistaken. Mrs. Dexter had put her whole plea into that one letter, feeling it a more delicate way of conveying her meaning than any dialogue, however carefully worded.

It was now nearing the end of March. Truth and her grandmother had returned to the old mansion under the guidance of the experienced nurse Van had put in charge. This worthy personage returned to Biloxi the following day much, it must be confessed, to the relief of her charge. A few days were given them to wander about the dear familiar place, and then came the afternoon when Van was expected. It was a time of suspense and trial for both women. It would be their first separation. Truth had assumed, all along, that Mrs. Dexter would accompany them to the North, and Van had insisted strenuously upon it; but the old lady was, for once, obdurate. "Young people are better to themselves," she said, and no remonstrances could move her.

As for Truth, the pang of parting was but one of a dozen apprehensions. She was about to face the great, strange world, "alone," as she expressed it to herself. Somehow Mr. Craighead, when absent, seemed to detach himself from her throbbing personality, and to persist in clinging as a mere detail to the wall of objectivity that stood vaguely over against her. She peered into her own future with the feelings of a child who has chanced to find, at last, the mysterious door in the oak-tree, or the ring of a buried stone which, once lifted, is to open the way to wild, impossible adventure. Though instinctively afraid of Van, she was more innocent, more ignorant of the world than

many a city child of eight. The most definite foreboding, shared in almost equal measure by her grandmother, was that, of all places, Boston should be forced upon her as a home. She shuddered at the thought of her uncle's long life of banishment and remorse in that cheerless region, and wondered if she would have to live in the very house he had occupied. To them the very name "Boston" presented a vision of a great theatrical stage, lighted with red fire, across which ran and shrieked wild-eyed abolitionists, atheists, infidels, blasphemers, women in bloomers, and possibly a late witch or two. Boston had been the centre of the coarsest invective against the South; from it had issued the great locust-scourge of carpet-baggers ready to devour the few green things left to the ruined land. Even now in that city negroes were treated as ladies and gentlemen, even addressed as "Mr." and "Mrs." Mrs. Dexter shuddered at the thought of *her* granddaughter risking social proximity to any of that race of slaves.

Van was on his way to Dexterville. The days were longer now than when he first made that memorable trip, and a warm, yellow glow hung late in the evening sky. Truth drove alone to the station in the light "buggy." On the road down she stopped beneath a bay-tree, and stood on the buggy seat to gather an early blossom. Smiling to herself, she placed it at the throat of her black dress, where it lay like a beautiful work in ivory and silver.

At the station she did not drive, as usual, to the open space of red clay, but remained half hidden among a group of young hickory bushes. Her heart gave a strange throb as she heard the whistle of the engine. She drew back still farther, and, unseen by Craighead, watched him spring out upon the platform, greet the grinning agent familiarly, and look about for Norah. The beating of her heart grew louder. This stranger's presence smote her with a sense of nearness, as of a fate she had always known, an almost dear reality that bound her to the tragedies of that awful

February week. She felt for a moment as if she were stifling. Then, with a determined little gasp, she sprang from the buggy and hurried up to the platform.

"Why, Truth! Is it really you?" cried Van, smiling with genuine pleasure as she approached. "And how well you are looking!" He seized both her hands and gazed frankly into her eyes. Her own lowered instantly, her face grew scarlet, and she stammered in her eagerness to speak naturally, as she said: —

"Oh, I'm lots and lots better! Grandma is too. It seems like it was almost wrong for us to get well so fast. But it was comin' home that really made her better. Oh, she is so good and patient and sweet!"

Forgetting herself, she lifted radiant, shining eyes to her husband.

"I can believe it!" he cried heartily. "I want to hear all that you have said and thought and done since getting back."

They drove up to the Big House, Truth holding the reins. Van noticed her fine, strong hands, with the sunburn dark upon them.

"You will have to wear gloves in Boston," he remarked in a friendly tone.

She looked down. "Will I?" she asked seriously. "I know I'll hate them. I never had gloves on in my life."

"A Boston lady would just as soon think of going out without her boots."

"Good heavens!" Truth turned startled eyes upon him. "Do ladies wear boots up there?" She was thinking of her grandfather's heavy jack boots. In the South all footgear for ladies falls under the terms "shoes," and "slippers." Van was puzzled. He glanced furtively at her feet. She wore neat buttoned boots of rather coarse leather.

"Yes," he said, in answer to her question. Then suddenly he began to fumble in his inner coat pocket. Taking from it a small parcel, he gave it to Truth.

"I've brought you a little remembrance — a little wedding present," he said, laughing in a slightly embarrassed way.

"For *me*!" exclaimed the girl, her sweet face flushing. "Oh, take the reins, quick, please, while I open it!" She transferred the ancient corrugated straps to her companion, but paused to ask, somewhat anxiously, "Do you reckon you can hold Moses?"

Now Moses was a mule who, for patience, meekness, and longevity fairly rivalled his illustrious namesake. Van, thinking of the quivering thoroughbreds he had guided at white heat along the smooth, fair highways of suburban Boston, laughed aloud.

"I *reckon* I can manage him."

Truth, reassured, began to open the parcel. With trembling fingers she removed the pretty pink string and the glazed white paper. Within was a plain leather case. She fumbled a moment at the unaccustomed spring. Van put one gloved finger just on the right spot and the top flew open, revealing, on a bed of white velvet, a chatelaine watch of exquisite workmanship.

"Oh! oh!" she gasped. "Is it for me, really? It's too beautiful! Oh, Mr. Craighead, I've wanted a watch all my life! They seem so sort of *alive*. They keep you company so."

"And you never had one before?"

"No, sir. Grandma's got one, all full of little pictures and diamonds, but it won't go. It has n't gone since the war. Grandpa said that its heart — he meant its spring, — broke with the heart of the South. But this one is a *million* times prettier. Oh, thank you again, Mr. Craighead!" She nestled closer, with the unconscious caress of a happy child.

"I am delighted to have brought you something that pleases you so much," said the young man. Her naïve appreciation was irresistible.

They drove on for some time in silence. Truth forgot

to resume control of "Moses," in her frequent peeps at her new treasure. The box, with its mysterious spring, was almost as enchanting as the watch itself. For once she was unobservant of wild-flowers or birds; but Craighead noted with what lush beauty the woods had adorned themselves during the month of his absence.

The old house looked statelier and more peaceful than ever under the green decoration of a thousand unpruned branches. Norah, driving a mottled cow into the lane, stopped short, and scraped and bowed with such emphasis of welcome that his white woolly head came near to entanglement in a bunch of weeds. Mrs. Dexter met them at the door with the same sweet smile which the Colonel's first introduction of Van had awakened. Doubtless she, too, held this young man in sacred association with the last great tragedy of her life. She did not look older because of her great suffering, only more fragile, more pure and white. No touch of rebellion lingered in her patient face, but there was a pathetic wistfulness in her eyes, a looking forward, a loosening of bonds from earth. As Van had anticipated, the sadness of the master's absence hallowed even the common things of daily life in that household. It was like the hush after a supreme symphony, or the tingling silence that precedes an impassioned prayer. It was much to Van's credit that he could appreciate the subtle essence of such an atmosphere.

Yes, the link between Mrs. Dexter's past and Truth's future was, indeed, Craighead. She greeted him almost affectionately, and hers was the first voice to suggest the immediate departure of the young couple. Through it all she did not falter, not even under the final embrace of her granddaughter.

They drove off in the same little buggy, but this time the reins were in Craighead's hands. Truth's one trunk lay in an open compartment in the rear. Turning, she leaned over this to wave a last kiss toward the slender figure still standing between the high pillars of the ve-

randa. The green boughs of trees, folding one upon another at each forward motion of the horse, soon blotted out the old home. Van nerved himself for a burst of tears, but none came. Truth resumed her seat beside him, adjusted her share of the lap-robe with shaking fingers, and then began peering about from side to side of the road, down into flowering grasses, up among budding tree-limbs, and out through opening vistas, all with a strange and desperate eagerness.

"Are you searching for anything?" Van asked, at length.

"Oh," she exclaimed with a start. She had forgotten his presence. "No, sir, I'm — I'm — only just callin' things down into my heart, to take with me."

Old Norah, who had come to drive the buggy home again, stood, with the freckled agent on the platform, and waved them a mournful good-bye.

The next morning in the train Truth looked out of the window with all the eagerness of a child. Once, at the sight of some negro-farce, enacted in pantomime at the side of the road, she burst into a clear, merry laugh, a laugh full of incipient, melodious chuckles and sliding half-tones that made one think of quick water over pebbles. The few passengers, all Southerners, laughed too in sympathetic enjoyment of her spontaneity; but Van flushed and stiffened perceptibly. Truth caught his expression, and laughed no more.

Soon after this she turned from the window, apparently weary of the passing show. Van leaned toward her and began a conversation. She answered pleasantly, but without interest. He withdrew into his own thoughts, and a long silence followed.

When next he looked at her she had fallen asleep. Her fair head was thrown in an uncomfortable position against the dingy gray cover of the seat. He motioned to the porter for a pillow, and hesitated a little before making a rather awkward attempt to slip it under her cheek. As

his hand touched her she awoke with a start, and, turning an intense scarlet, she thanked him, collapsed upon the pillow, and shut her eyes tighter than before.

Van regarded her with some irritation. Her childish self-consciousness and timidity, carried thus into publicity, were extremely distasteful to him. As he looked, her eyelids quivered, and two large tears forced themselves out from the dark lashes and coursed diagonally across her half-averted face. Their damp path collected particles of dust and ashes, which she made no attempt to wipe away. A quick, sharp pang pierced to the young man's heart. He picked up a paper, shook it out savagely, and burrowed his head in it, his thoughts reaching forward restlessly to the probable manifold frictions of their joint future.

At Providence Station a buoyant figure rushed to meet them, struggling under the weight of a huge pyramidal bouquet. It was Norton, of course.

"How did you know we were coming by this train? I did n't wire you!" was Van's not very cordial greeting.

"Been coming to every train for two days!" replied the unabashed youth. "This is the third bouquet I've worn out!"

Van laughed in spite of himself.

Truth was hanging back, stunned by the rush of sound, as a thousand eager passengers hurried past her. Had she heard, she would not have understood the cool banter of these Northern chums.

"Mrs. Craighead," said her husband, making way for her with an excess of manner, "this is my law-partner, Mr. Quincy Norton."

Norton's eyes were fairly glistening with eager interrogation and kindly welcome, as, in lieu of the ordinary hand-shake, he held out his absurd offering. Truth gave him one grateful look, clear and fresh as the note of a bird, and letting handkerchief and parasol fall unheeded to the ground, seized the flowers with both hands.

"Oh, the sweet things! the dear things!" she cried in delight. "And how lovely they smell! Thank you! Thank you ever so much, Mr. — Quinsynawtun! I'm so much obliged!"

"You like 'em!" cried the junior partner, in rapture. "You won't let Van lecture me for coming down to the train, will you, Mrs. Craighead?"

Truth's face sobered as she looked at her husband. Let *Van*! Sooner would she think of interfering with Moses and the twenty dynasties of the Pharaohs!

"That's all right, old chap!" Van broke in. "You mean well, I know. You must come up to see us just as soon as we are settled; for I hope you and Truth are going to become great cronies."

"If 'cronies' means friends, I am sure we will," said Truth, shyly.

"It's a bargain!" chuckled the effervescing youth.

A few moments later the ill-acquainted couple drove off in state to their new home. It had been a late winter in the North, and as they turned out of Park Square (into Boylston Street) hundreds of gayly dressed young people were darting swiftly across the frozen lake in the Public Garden. Truth uttered an amazed "Oh!" and stared with all her might. "They're only skating," was Van's laconic information. Scanning the faces of pedestrians on the Boylston Street Mall, the little bride remarked, with some relief, that they did not look altogether inhuman. But the shop-fronts, with their enormous plate-glass windows, mosaiced in gorgeous costumes, deep-toned Oriental rugs, or glittering Japanese screens, seemed visions of impossible splendor. The squareness of the streets, the absence of trees, the vista of colossal stone palaces along Arlington, the carved animals over the windows of the Natural History Building, the terraced steps of the Institute, the air-hung pyramids of Trinity's towers, and, more than all, the stupendous white fortress of the Public Library dominating Copley Square, oppressed her with a sense of magnifi-

cence, of civilization, of the power of the North, of the presence of man, which belied every generalization of her rustic, untutored youth. It was her first revelation of a real city.

The carriage stopped before "The Hanover," one of the most fashionable apartment hotels in that new residential district so queerly named, "The Back Bay." Van had felt some apprehension as to Truth's *début* in this metropolitan world, and shot more than one critical glance toward her as she followed him up under the marble portico, and into the great heated space of the palm-fringed hall. She was carrying herself well, almost disdainfully. As he handed his umbrella and valise to a jaunty negro bell-boy, she followed suit with bag and parasol, in a manner even more condescending than his own. She was a haughty young aristocrat, in spite of her ill-fitting clothes. The boy, who was done up in green, with brass buttons, ushered them into a drawing-room. Here stood tall porcelain vases, decorated profusely in gold and colors. Colossal mirrors and oil-paintings glared from the lofty, tinted walls. The heavy furniture was carved, and covered with delicate brocade.

Van just had time to ask his bride, "Well, what do you think of it?" and that bewildered young person to reply, "It's mighty big!" when the incipient conversation was cut short by the reappearance of the gentlemanly dorky with a bunch of long brass keys. "We are to be shown to our rooms," said Van, rising. Truth followed without question, and the three entered a little cushioned closet about the size of a railway compartment. As it suddenly shot up into the air, she turned a little pale, but remained quiet, with head erect. "She's a trump!" thought Van, remembering his experience with a fair cousin from Maine, who, in her first elevator, had fallen prone upon him, shrieking to be saved.

The negro unlocked the door of the suite which Van had engaged, and then drew back respectfully for the young couple to enter. Truth went in first, and paused, with an

involuntary gasp. It was like pictures of the French palaces in her "History of Napoleon." There were four connecting rooms, and a bath-room, all painted, frescoed, and furnished in white, gold, green, and rose. The gleam of crystal and brass, the soft tints of yielding, plushy carpets, and flowered window-hangings dazzled with indescribable splendor the eyes of the little country maid. She was led from room to room, but made no comment. The situation was more than she could comprehend.

"Well, Truth," asked Van, a little piqued, "are n't you pleased with it?"

"Ye-e-s," she answered thoughtfully. "I never knew there was any such houses out of fairy-stories, or palaces in history. But what is it for? You don't mean that we are — that I am — goin' to *live* here!"

"Yes, of course! Why not?"

"But what can we do with the rest of it?"

"Oh!" laughed Van, taking in her perplexity. "Did you think it was all ours? We've taken only this little corner suite; but we can have it always for our own, fit it up just as we like, and make it into a real home."

"But I don't see any kitchen and dining-room."

"No, we take our meals in the restaurant. You will have no responsibilities of housekeeping whatever, and can do just what you please."

Truth looked even more puzzled. "Then do other people live here, too?"

"I should say so, — about three hundred!"

"And will they like to have me live with them?"

Van sighed at her mediæval ignorance. "I had better tell you something about apartment hotels, I guess."

"I wish you *would*!" said Truth, humbly.

"Well, take for a premise, say, fifty families, with an average income of five thousand a year. Naturally they want to get from that sum the greatest possible amount of comfort with the least possible friction."

"Of course!" Truth nodded.

"This can best be done by co-operation ; so they contribute proportional expenses, build a big house like this, take what rooms each pleases, and live by machinery. The house is heated by great furnaces in the basement ; cooking and laundry-work are done by organized forces ; there are telephones, messenger service, barber-shops, Turkish baths, reading-rooms, for common use, — everything, in fact, except theatres, churches, and hospitals, under a single roof."

"How splendid !" cried Truth, much impressed. "And did you help to build this one?"

Van laughed. "I was giving you the principle," he said. "The reality is quite a different thing. As actually conducted, they are built by a speculator, and run by a manager. The two divide the spoils."

"Then why do the people come, if they are run by bad men?"

"Oh, they do it for their wives' sake. The modern woman is far above housekeeping. She must broaden her mind, and elevate her soul. It does n't matter what becomes of husband or children !"

"That sounds awful !" said Truth, ashamed, though she did not quite know why. "Don't any of the ladies here have anything to do?"

"Oh, yes ; they find plenty to do, such as it is," answered Craighead, with a bitter smile. "They go to dressmakers and hair-dressers, Turkish baths, manicures, chiropodists, palmists, astrologers, and masseuses. They have soul-ecstasies over Ibsen, fall into trances at the symphony concerts, and flirt with Jean de Reszke. They infest the business part of the town, demanding that men shall sign long scrolls of woman-suffrage petitions, go off to their club-houses, where we are not allowed to follow, and afterward grovel at the feet of Oriental priests, large fat priests with melting eyes, and a transcendental appreciation of American flesh-pots. They rush from clinical lectures to spiritual séances, from sociological meetings to

swell afternoon teas, from Olympic games where Harvard darlings get their collar-bones cracked to Zoroaster, from Professor Choice's exposition of the Unknowableness of the *Ding an Sich* to a performance of Shakespeare by females in tights. They read books on Mathematics and Logic, and carry them into street-cars with their titles uppermost; they dress up in becoming aprons and frizzled hair, to paint impressionistic smudges. They discuss Theology in the same breath with the latest tonic. They quote Emerson, and tear one another's characters to pieces with the same smile. Men are their chief toys and subjects. A husband is a sort of sheet armor and cash-register in one; other men, legitimate victims for vivisection, if caught."

"Oh, Mr. Craighead! how perfectly dreadful! How can you bear to live in such a place? Grandma was afraid of Boston —"

Van laughed harshly, but with the laugh his senses returned. He had been thinking, perhaps, of one typical woman, who embodied most of the virtues and vices of his rapid denunciation.

"Don't look so frightened, child! Perhaps I exaggerated. I believe they are harmless in the main. Of course there are plenty of noble women here, as everywhere. I spoke rather of the frivolous leaders of fashion, who acknowledge no duties, and are stung by the gad-fly of intellectual ambition. It's as much the fault of the men as the women. They are a pack of over-ridden fools!"

Truth gazed at him imploringly. She longed to tell him that she would never do a single one of these horrible things. He caught the childish pleading of her glance.

"I'm not afraid of you, little girl," he said kindly. "I believe you have been better brought up. But there are many things that you will need to study, and I want you to do so, only be careful not to run into fads."

Soon after this he went down to the office, and Truth

was left alone. As she ventured to explore the luxurious apartment by herself, and began to unpack and put away her few shabby personal belongings, she felt light-hearted to think that she already possessed some of those very qualities which differentiated her from these dreadful Northern women.

When Van returned from a short sojourn at the "office," the hotel elevator was at the very top of the tall heap of brick and stone. Not caring to wait for it, he hurried up the three flights of stairs to his apartments, where, on reaching the corridor, he was surprised to see the negro bell-boy crouched before the door with his ear to the key-hole. At sight of Craighead, the negro sprang to his feet and slouched away. From within the room came the low, rich tones of an untrained contralto, singing,

"Aldo' I is, so fah away,
I hears de jay-bird plain;
I feels de gentle breezes play
Among de sugar-cane.

"O Alabamy, fah away!
Sweet home ub lub an' light,
I'll sing an' play, de lib-long day,
But dream ob you at night."

He opened the door softly. She was rocking backward and forward in a little gilt chair, her eyes closed and her head thrown back as she sang away her first pang of homesickness. An old-fashioned daguerreotype of Colonel and Mrs. Dexter taken together was on the mantle. Over the frame a bit of gray-beard moss was draped, and a little pine-cone stood on each side.

Van had not the heart to tell the child that it was unusual for Boston apartment-hotel ladies to sing negro songs in so heartfelt a manner. She had come to herself, with a start, as he entered.

He took the little ringless hands in his (he had not thought to buy her a wedding ring) and said, very

kindly, "Do you think that my little Alabama princess can be happy in this cold, hard Boston?"

"I know I can be happy with *you*," she answered bravely. "And, oh! I'm goin' to try so hard to be good."

Van felt something husky and warm in his throat. "I fancy that will not be very difficult," he said. "But, Truth, look here! Would you go back to grandma tomorrow, if you could?"

Truth hung her head. "N-o — o-o!"

CHAPTER XI

THREE DUETS AND A TRIO

CRAIGHEAD allowed himself another day's vacation, and introduced Truth to some of the more reputable of Boston's gods. He enjoyed both the naïveté of her remarks and his pride in his own condescension and superior breeding.

First they drove to Deutschmann's, where, as Craighead had hoped, they were too early to encounter the fashionable throng. But a great many richly dressed persons, male and female, stood about in indoor costume, a few of whom Van addressed with a polite and even familiar "Good-morning!" Truth wondered why she was not introduced to them, and felt just a little tingle of mortification until she discovered that they were part of the establishment. Instinctively her manner grew more reserved, and she did not notice the side glances thrown at her inadequate raiment.

Van realized that he knew little of women's gowns, also that his wife knew less. But her need of them was apparent. It was an awkward position; he chose hastily two ready-made costumes, — a rich greenish silk, covered with jet, and a street dress of Pompeian red, heavily braided. This was the sort of gowns that Orchid wore. A haughty "saleslady" invited Truth into one of the little stalls for "trying on," but now the girl asserted herself. She was in mourning, she said, deep mourning, — and could n't wear anything but black. Also she could n't even *think* of taking off her waist and being fitted in that strange place!

The saleslady was compassionate. "Had n't I better send quite a number of half-mourning gowns to your

residence, sir? Maybe the lady will be willing to try them on at home."

"By all means!" cried Craighead, in great relief. "That is by far the best plan. Mrs. Craighead, you see, is quite young and — er — shy."

The saleslady lowered her lids.

"Would you want that I should send anything else, sir? Hosiery, lingerie, French underwear? I have a new lot, all hand-made, just from the custom-house."

Truth turned away, scarlet.

"Yes, send them all, — everything!" said the purchaser in desperation. "Send the whole shop!"

After this experience the carriage was dismissed, and the young couple walked slowly up Boylston to Copley Square. The thin, cold wind was like wine to Truth's blood, and brought unwonted tints to her cheeks. Snow was such a novelty that she scooped up a handful of it from a shady niche beside Trinity Church, and proceeded to make a snowball.

She insisted upon spelling out all the names on the face of the Public Library, mistaking them for a list of Boston's departed great ones. Within she appeared overwhelmed at the vast number of volumes. "Why, I did n't know there was so many books in the whole world!" she exclaimed. As for the hall-way, her impression that these must be the "golden stairs," derived confirmation from the diaphanous physique of the young ladies in Puvis de Chavannes' fresco.

On entering the Art Museum she shrank back in dismay, and her cheeks became crimson. In the sculpture gallery her eyes never left the floor, and her discomfort was so obvious that Van took pity, and led her to an upper gallery, where Japanese *Nō* dresses and French laces soon restored her to tranquillity.

From the third day Truth was left alone, like a forest bird in a golden cage. Van became engrossed in important cases, and the little bride was too timid and homesick

to venture out alone. Her greatest pleasure and comfort at this time were in writing long letters to her grandmother.

A few mornings later, when they had met, as usual, in their pretty drawing-room and gone down to breakfast together, Van, across the tiny restaurant table, broached a topic new to their limited conversation.

"Father may be here to call, this forenoon."

The childish face opposite lighted up with pleasure. "Will he? Oh, I'm so glad. I do hope he'll like me."

Van felt it his duty to discourage undue enthusiasm. "You must not expect any great cordiality. My father is a just man, but a hard one. Remember, he is a New Englander, and his temperament partakes of the climate's peculiarities."

"Then he ain't like grandpa?"

"Not at all. No two men could be more unlike. And you must not say 'ain't' in Boston."

She looked so mortified that he hastened to add, "But that's all right. You'll get over these little mistakes fast enough. As for my father,—we must see what Southern gentleness will do for him."

"I'll surely try," said Truth, humbly.

From the hotel drawing-room window she watched Van leap upon the platform of a car, and then, hurrying to her rooms, began with a few deft feminine touches upon the unfamiliar material to make the place as home-like as possible. Under the pressure of this new excitement she actually ventured down Boylston Street to a florist's, and came back laden with lilacs and lilies of the valley. "I reckon he'll like Northern flowers best," she had thought. She smiled quietly to herself as she moved about the rooms. She was thinking how proud she would be to write of this important visit to her grandmother.

It was about half after ten when an office boy knocked, and presented the card of "Mr. Hiram Van der W. Craighead."

"Tell him to come right in," said Truth, eagerly.

She stood waiting with nervously clasped hands ; her heart beat so that the pulsations shook her. A tall, thin form entered the room, with a slight stoop in its carriage, and a slow, uncertain step. She came forward, a slender, charming figure in black, with face raised as if in expectation of a caress. She was dying to kiss him and call him "father." But the narrow, wrinkled, unemotional countenance above her congealed this hasty tenderness, and the smile fell from her lips, as a petal from a blighted rose.

"Good-mornin'!" she faltered. "I'm very glad to see you." He barely touched her cold fingers with his hard old palm.

"Good-mornin'!" he answered icily. "This is Van der Weyde's wife, I presume."

In her embarrassment she did not ask him to be seated, but he now walked stiffly across the room to a soft, leather-cushioned chair. She sat down at a little distance, staring at him dumbly. The old man's eyes wandered with a look of disapprobation among the luxurious furnishings. At length Truth forced herself to break the awkward silence.

"Mr. Craighead told me you were comin'."

"I got his letter yesterday sayin' you was up here. He did n't inform me he would marry when he went South, but I feared he was goin' to get into some trouble in them parts."

"It — was — very — very — sudden," she said, with a little gasp between each word. "I wish you could 'a' been there."

Mr. Craighead, Senior, looked at her with hard, greenish-gray eyes. "How long 'd you known him?"

"About four, — no, five or six days, I think," she stammered, as if confessing a crime.

"It don't take long, these times," remarked the old man grimly. "I kept company with his mother fourteen year."

"Did n't you get tired, — of waitin'?" asked the girl,

who was now so nervous that she scarcely knew what she said.

"I guess not!" Her father-in-law's eyes were now little cold points of steel. "I guess it's better to git tired before, ruther 'n after. That's what comes o' these suddin' weddin's, *I've* heard."

The anger of his words was clearer to Truth than the meaning. She clasped her hands together nervously.

"Oh, please don't be mad!" she pleaded. "I did n't mean to be so impolite, — but I just thought — it *did* seem long."

After a pause, the old man said slowly, his eyes on the carpet: "My eldest son was killed at Dobb's Ferry! They couldn't find his body! Van der Weyde was brought up to hate rebels. Did your folks keep slaves?"

"Grandma's father had six hundred on his cotton plantation," she said proudly. "I don't understand much about slaves and the war. That was too long ago. But I am sorry about your eldest son. That must have been terrible! I — I did n't know any nice people fought among the Yan — on *that* side, I mean, er — grandma said —"

"You did n't know *what*?" Her visitor was staring in a sort of dazed anger.

"Oh, I just meant any of the first families. Now I know better. If Mr. Craighead's brother and your son —" She broke off to look in his face with a tremulous, apologetic little smile.

"Humph!" grunted the old man, still staring.

"But I know what you mean about *this* son," she hurried on. "He ought to have married some smart, fine lady up North here. I know I'm not half smart enough for him! He's so noble and good and handsome! But it all came so sudden! — grandpa died — we were all alone — he was so good to us! And grandma was about to die, too — oh, it was terrible!" She hid her face.

Old Craighead looked puzzled, but pursued the tenor of his thoughts. "Van der Weyde ain't been brought up to

such new-fangled fixin's as these." Again he looked about the room. "I dunno as I'd 'a' chosen his wife to have such expensive habits."

Truth looked up amazed. "I did n't choose anything," she said. "I ain't used to them either. We've been poor ever since the war. We would n't be rich now if it was n't that Mr. Craighead made me take the money."

"What money?"

"My poor Uncle Eugene's. I did n't *want* to take it. It is millions and millions, I believe. I took it to save grandma."

The old man was waking up. "Who was this Uncle Yewgene?"

Truth hung her head. This was their one family disgrace; it was hard to have to reveal it so soon.

"He was — he was a — *traitor*!" she answered. "He sold the South to her enemies, and fought against his own brother. He said he was goin' to leave us all the money, but grandpa told him not to dare to. Then he died, and left it anyway, and Mr. Craighead came down South to talk about it. Then daddy, — that's grandpa, — got mad and went off in the woods on Black Betty to think about it, and it was thinking about it that — that — killed him." The poor child buried her face again. The recollection was too much for her.

The old man's countenance was a study. This was a specimen of human character never before encountered. He wondered dimly what might be the clue to such unheard-of sentiments, — whether the girl were imbecile, or artful, or genuine. The last supposition was the most incredible of the three.

"Where's your property located?" he managed to ask, at last.

"Here in Boston. It's a lot of stores and ugly tall houses down by Mr. Craighead's office. He took me there one day and made me sign a lot of papers."

"He did, did he? Where is my son now?"

"I — I don't know. At the office, I reckon."

"Does he leave you alone, much?"

Truth flushed. "Of course he goes to his office." Her tone had a hint of resentment. "He comes up to lunch when he ain't too busy, and he's nearly always here to supper, — I mean — dinner."

"Is he here evenings?"

"He is your son, Mr. Craighead. If you want to know these things, I wish you would ask *him*, not me."

Old Craighead allowed himself a grim smile. But Truth, fearing that she had been too brusque, said earnestly: "I don't mind bein' left alone at all! I'm used to goin' to bed early, an' I just love to read in bed."

"Humph!" said the old man for the second time during the interview.

When, soon after, he rose to go, he took her hand in his and held it clumsily as he said:—

"I guess you'll do. You're a good girl, and I ain't goin' to let Van der Weyde mistreat ye."

She smiled up into his face. "You need n't be afraid of that. He is *aw*-fully good to me. But I do get a little homesick sometimes. I wish you'd come to see me real often."

On the way to his son's office old Craighead left the car at the corner of West Street and dived for an early lunch into that subterranean retreat known to bachelors and busy husbands as "The Old Elm."

"One stein! One schnitzel!" shouted a rubicund waiter across the sanded floor.

At the table in front of him sat two young men, American musicians, he judged, from their technical use of Teutonic-Italian.

"Were you at Mrs. Wiley's *musicale* last evening?" the freckled one was asking, as he plunged his blond beard into the foam of a colossal schooner.

"Yes," replied the tall, handsome, and haughty genius

who was regaling himself on roast goose and apple-sauce. "Oeffler's trio in G major was *gut* — *ganz Brahmsisch*, — notably the andante. Little Boyton's sonata tinkled its *affettuosos*, as usual. One mince-pie, if you please, Kellner!"

"Was Van Craighead there? That's what *I* want to know!" queried the first.

"No; and methought the fair Orchid looked quite lost without him. I suppose he prefers her little *tête-à-têtes*."

"He's married now, you know. A rich creole from New Orleans! She's ignorant, they say; and I don't suppose our cruel siren will care to take her up."

"He'll go to see Orchid all the same. Mark my word!" said the tall man, wiping his Franco-German moustache. "She isn't one to let her victims off so easily."

"He neglects the girl already, so Mrs. Haines says. They have a suite, you know, at the Hanover."

"Is it so?" The tall man rose to depart. "Shall I see you at the Symphony to-night?"

"Paddy plays. You *bet*!"

"Tra-la-la!"

Within ten minutes after this pleasing dialogue, old Craighead burst unceremoniously into the Milk Street office. He made no movement to take off his overcoat, but, as he sat down, remarked, "Saw your wife this mornin'."

Van began deliberately to pile up letters in squares, as if erecting a fortification on the desk before him.

"So you had to go down and marry a rebel, did n't ye?" the affectionate parent went on. "The daughter of a slave-driver! I knowed your trip to the South warn't goin' to do ye no good."

"I believe gentlemen are accustomed to refer to their daughters-in-law in terms of respect," put in Van, slowly and icily, without looking up.

"I ain't sayin' nothin' against the girl," retorted the old man. "Maybe she's a darned sight too good for some folks!"

Van eyed his progenitor warily.

"You did n't marry her for good looks, did ye?" the latter proceeded.

"I consider her appearance sufficiently creditable."

"An' 't warn't for her brains, neither. She don't know any too much!"

"If you don't approve of Mrs. Craighead, you are not obliged to continue the acquaintance," said Van, a little hotly.

"'Tain't her!" exclaimed the old man. "She's all right! The p'int is, what you done to make her marry you, after three days' courtin'."

Van drew himself up indignantly, but his father scored on.

"Had to bribe her with her own money, didn't ye? Held out a fortune with one hand and married it back with the other! You're not such a fool as I thought."

Van bit his lip. His father was seldom other than acrid.

"No, you're too darned smart! The silly little thing's fallen into your trap. You're makin' her sign away her rights."

"Stop!" shouted Van. "If you were not my father, I would say, 'You lie!' I scorn to answer your insinuations."

The old man looked relieved; but his tone was still bitter enough. "Then you ain't goin' to set up rival cotton-mills down in Alabamy?"

"What are you driving at?" asked Van sharply, thinking it high time to take the lead.

"Look here, Van der Weyde!" said the old man, solemnly. "You've got a heft of responsibility on your soul. I come to tell you I want you to treat that poor

little thing as you 'd ought to. She's lonesome and homesick ; and you're just leavin' her to pine away, now that you've got her money."

"I don't quite follow your meaning," said Van, stiffly. "She won't go out evenings. I've asked her to often enough. She's in mourning for her grandfather, she says. Besides, I've got the biggest case coming on that the Suffolk bar ever saw. The money's *hers*, I tell you! I've got to earn my own living!"

"That ain't it, again!" probed the old man, persistently and slowly. "Why don't you git her some friends? Decent folks, I mean. Why do you spend your evenin's with married women where you darsn't take her?"

Streaks of red lightning began to vein the marble of the younger man's countenance. "Look here!" he said angrily, "I'll stand more from you than any man living—but—" His lips went on twitching, though articulation had ceased.

"Did n't Mrs. Wiley invite you to her sworry last evening?"

"Mrs. Wiley!" Van caught his breath. How in the mischief had the old mouser got hold of that name? "No," he answered sulkily. "I haven't seen Mrs. Wiley but once!—Damn Mrs. Wiley!"

"A proper but unnecessary sentiment," remarked the old man, still more relieved. "Just you remember, I'm goin' to see that Mrs. Craighead's done right by, now that you've gone and married her," he added, as he rose to depart.

As soon as the elevator door clicked, Van's conjectures began rapidly to take shape. "By George, the old gentleman was on the war-path! I wonder what Truth said to stir him up so. She couldn't have been complaining!" Here the young man frowned, and looked vaguely about his office. Then he pulled out his watch. "Too early for luncheon," he muttered. "Guess I'll go up anyhow, and give Truth a surprise."

After her father-in-law's departure, Truth remained standing at the window, her eyes resting in dreamy abstraction upon the street, with its bustle of passing life. Van's one relative was sufficiently unlike her lost Southern ones, in all conscience ; yet within the shrivelled old husk Truth's childish faith had discovered a kernel of sweet, nutritious sentiment.

"I believe he liked me right well, — at the end," she murmured to herself. "And I will just *love* him into likin' me more."

A shining coupé stopped before the hotel with snort and clatter. A faultlessly attired footman, for all the world like pictures she had seen in London papers, threw back the glass door, and Truth leaned eagerly to watch the occupant alight, — a slender, graceful woman, brilliant in rose-color and scintillating with jet. She gave one swift glance toward the many windows of the great building, and then ran jauntily up the steps, to disappear beneath the marble portico. Truth was seized by an inexplicable excitement. What a dazzling creature! Involuntarily she contrasted that buoyant, alert, self-possessed being with her own shrinking person.

"Oh, if I could only be like that!" she thought. "But I never will be. I'm too ugly, and — scared of things."

An instant later she was called to the door to answer her second knock of the morning. On the tray lay a card inscribed "Mrs. Thomas Courtney Wiley."

"For me?" asked Truth, incredulously.

"Yes, for Mrs. Craighead, mum."

"Ask her to come up here, then."

"I wonder if it's another of Mr. Craighead's kin-folks," she had begun to speculate, when a soft whisper and click of jet in the corridor arrested her attention. A moment later the self-same radiant figure that she had watched descending from the carriage glorified the doorway, — poised for a moment in her flight, as it were, — and then advanced frankly toward the girl with outstretched hand.

Truth had no opportunity for shyness. Orchid's clear voice, already lifted, brightened her spirits like sunshine.

"Van has never mentioned me, I presume? Of course not! Young husbands never do! But I charged him to tell you that I should be among the first to call."

Truth was smiling now, as if she had just caught a new and gorgeous butterfly.

"No, he *did n't* tell me!" she admitted reluctantly. "I don't see how he could have forgot!" Her childish face was full of admiration; but Orchid tossed off the naïve compliment with a dainty, deprecating shrug.

"I watched you gettin' out of your ca'riage," Truth went on, feeling strangely happy and at ease in this gracious presence. "But I did n't dream you was comin' to see me!"

"Of course I was! Yes, indeed! I could not rest until I had seen Van's wife! We were all so much interested in his romantic marriage!"

"Were you?" said Truth, in some wonder. "Why, I didn't know anybody up here knew anything about it."

By this time Orchid had nestled herself comfortably against the cushions on the little gilt sofa, crossed one knee over the other, and was laughing directly into Truth's eyes.

"Oh, yes!" she cried, in answer to Truth's last remark. "You may be sure we did! Let me see, — you're from the South, I believe."

"Yes," answered the girl, simply, "from Alabama." A film of sadness blotted out the new sunshine of her face.

"I've never had the pleasure of going there myself," Orchid graciously vouchsafed, "but I've always heard that it was lovely."

"Oh, it *is* lovely!" cried Truth. "Every day as I think about it it seems to get lovelier. I don't see how I ever left it!"

"Then you don't like Boston?"

"I — I — did n't say that, exactly. I have n't seen

very much of Boston yet. Mr. Craighead took me round a little the first day; but he's so busy now he don't have time. I went to church once, but it did n't seem a bit like church. The people here talk so different from us!"

"They do indeed! — Yes, Southerners are famous for their soft voices. The climate of New England makes us literally cackle."

"Oh, no!" stammered Truth, "I did n't mean that. I only meant that they don't pronounce like we do."

"You'll soon get used to it," said Orchid, brightly. "In a year or more Bostonese will sound to you as familiar as — er — African. But now tell me something of your home in the South, — your dear, far-away South."

She was the very embodiment of sympathetic cordiality as she leaned forward, waiting for her hostess to speak; and the childish heart of the poor little homesick bride began to unfold, like a flower at dawn.

"Well, we lived in Alabama," she began, "in a great big house right in the piney woods. There used to be big plantations all around, but now there's nothin' but Uncle Norah's cabin, and a few broken-down shanties, — and the fields have gone to grass."

"You must have been heartbroken at leaving such a place!"

"Well, I *was*!" Truth blurted out. "But I *had* to come! Grandma said it would be a sin if I did n't. I was married, you know."

"Grandma was eminently right," said Orchid, gravely. "And then, — Mr. Craighead's feelings!"

"Oh, don't think it was because I did n't like *him*!" cried the girl, quickly. "I shall never forget how good he was in all that trouble. Why, grandma would have died if it had n't been for him! That's why it was all so sudden."

Orchid's green eyes had been gathering emeralds. The plot was deeper than she had thought.

"It was just a trifle sudden," she admitted, though with

deprecating gentleness. "Even his closest friends were unaware of the engagement."

Truth hesitated a moment. Surely this stranger was one to be trusted. "We was n't engaged!" she cried, with explosive confidence. "He had come down to talk about the will. Then my grandpa was — killed — and grandma, she was dyin', and Mr. Craighead took charge of everything for us. We were about to starve, he said. So just because he was so good and noble he gave up everything for our sakes and married me. Oh, you don't know how good he is!"

"Perhaps I do, — better than you think," smiled Orchid. "He is noted, even in Boston, for his kind heart."

"I don't wonder," said the little bride, ingenuously. "I believe he is the best man in the whole world!"

"I envy you your faith. How happy you must be in the care of such a man!"

"Oh, I ought to be! I know I *ought* to be! But I can't help feeling that I'm not old and — smart enough for him. It worries him when I'm scared of people. I wish I could begin again and go to school, — but I reckon I'm too big. Besides, I'm married."

"Why, my dear!" broke in her listener. "You don't know what you are talking about! Let me inform you that, in Boston, forty years is the limit of youth, eighty of middle age, and that one may attend school up to the borders of physical infirmity. I knew an old lady who began to study Greek at ninety. It's never too late to get culture; on the other hand, it's never too early. Let us begin at once! I foresee great fun before us. You have never heard Paderewski? — good heavens! What bliss awaits you! I've a good mind to take you to-night — no! you shall hear him first at my house!"

Truth's face was full of excitement, but the light died as she answered, "That's mighty good of you! I can't go out now, except to church. I'm in deep mournin'." She glanced down along the folds of her sombre dress.

"Besides," more shyly, "I could n't go without Mr. Craighead."

"Nonsense, my dear! I did n't say he was n't to come! But even so, he would be delighted to feel that you were spending a pleasant evening without him. Boston wives generally make plans without consulting their husbands."

"I—I—don't believe I ever shall," said Truth in a troubled voice. "I don't think I should ever want to!"

"Oh, you're too delicious!" laughed Orchid, and clapped her little gloved hands together. "You are an anachronism! But whether you want to or not, you'll soon do it!" She nodded her head sagely, but there was a gleam, not wholly of amusement, in her shining eyes.

Truth looked still more troubled. "I know you must be jokin', Mis's Wiley," she answered. "You seem too kind and good to be one of those bad, wicked married ladies that Mr. Craighead told me about!"

Orchid's alert vibrations ceased abruptly. The glance she sent across the room was like a poisonous arrow.

"And what were they, if I may ask?"

"Why—why—" stammered Truth—"of course he didn't mean you,—please don't look angry,—but the kind that don't work or care anything about their husbands, and run around to all sorts of funny lectures with fat melting Hindoo priests—and like to dissect other men—and—and all sorts of horrible things that I can't think of now. But I promised him then, and I *swore* to myself that I would never be that kind of lady!"

In the whirlpool of conflicting emotions that threatened to engulf the listener, a quick sense of humor gained, for the moment, precarious dominance. She laughed. Then she laughed again, and again, until her pendent jet was in glittering convulsions.

Truth wondered what was so very funny, but laughed, too, in sympathy.

Orchid was now slightly hysterical. Her flimsy lace handkerchief was soaked with tears. She fought ob-

viously, desperately, with the increasing paroxysms. When finally she began to conquer, the reaction, sweeping back the tattered semblance of mirth, left bare an ugly wound of vanity, whose ache, growing momentarily deeper, goaded her into a mad desire to hurt, to crush, to sting.

She hated the round face before her, with its big, clear eyes. Its innocence was maddening! How much had Van already confided? Her voice had regained its usual low sweetness, as she said:—

“Pardon me! I don’t know when I have laughed so boisterously; but your description was excruciating! Fortunately I have not, among my wide circle of acquaintances, any such frenzied haridans as you have pictured. The women I know are companions to their husbands, and their husbands’ friends; able to cope with them in discussions upon science, politics, or philosophy, — widely read, graceful, exquisitely dressed women, able to win a man’s love and — to hold it!”

Truth hung her head. Instinctively she felt the sting in her visitor’s smooth voice, and knew that the description of these ideal women included all that she, Truth, was not, and never could be.

“Yes, that is what I meant, — the kind of lady that Mr. Craighead ought to ‘a’ married,” she said, miserably. She bit her lips to keep back the tears. Orchid did not spare her.

“Your husband is one of the most brilliant men in Boston, Mrs. Craighead. I have always considered it my greatest privilege to share the workings of his splendid mind. It was intoxicating!”

“Did you know him — a long time — before?” asked Truth, trying to make her voice unconcerned.

“Oh, ages and ages!” laughed the other. “He was constantly at our house. So you see, my dear, I owe you quite a grudge for marrying him before I could interpose. But it is all in the past now!” She gave a prolonged, sentimental sigh. “He used to argue over all his law-

cases with me before venturing to take them into court. I anticipated for him the effect on both judge and jury. It is hard to lose it all!"

Truth bridled.

"If he wants to keep on — I —" she was beginning hotly, when the door opened without warning, and Van, his hat still on, entered quite breathless. Seeing Orchid he stopped short, as if he had run up against a mesmeric barrier. In fact, all three were suddenly struck rigid, as three pillars of salt. Truth was still indignantly erect; Orchid leaning forward, perched lightly on the edge of the sofa, an iridescent kingfisher about to strike.

She was the first to recover self-possession. "Never mind your wife, Van! but take off your hat in the presence of strangers!"

He jerked off the offending article, muttering, at the same time, something about thinking that Mrs. Craighead might have gone down to lunch, flung his outer garments into a chair, and stood looking back and forward from his wife to Orchid, as if to say, "What in the devil does all this mean?"

His old friend smiled back at him. "Why don't you thank me for calling on Mrs. Craighead, Van? And why didn't you keep your promise to let me know when she came? You can't expect me to practise telepathy on you — *now!*"

Van glanced at Truth. She had not stirred. What had this mischief-maker been saying to her? He saw that the situation called upon him for an extraordinary effort. He must divert this stream of tell-tale sarcasm from her ears, and at the same time blind the enemy to the depth of his own alarm. He regained self-possession with difficulty.

"Indeed, Mrs. Wiley, I thank you for this, and many other kindnesses; but this in particular, if it has brought even a half-hour's brightness into the life of my poor little Southern bride." He turned from Orchid to Truth, and, smiling into her dazed eyes, said very gently: "My dear,

I've hurried up from the office to tell you that I've managed to get an afternoon off. I have ordered an open carriage filled with enough foot-warmers and fur rugs to keep even a tropical lily from being chilled, and I am going to take you far out through the Fens, and into the country."

Truth's face relaxed. "Oh, that would be splendid!" she said. "Are you sure that you are not too busy?"

"I am sure, quite sure," he rejoined, with a smile that was honied balm to one woman, but salt in the wound of the other.

"Won't there be room for Mrs. Wiley? I'd be mighty glad to have her go with us if she will!" The girl's high breeding showed through her homely words.

Orchid bit her lip, but a glance into Van's blank face restored her.

"How kind! How very kind!" she cried. "Indeed, Mrs. Craighead, few young wives would be so generous. But I fear that it would prove an embarrassment of riches for your husband. We must think of him, too, you know. Besides, how could I be so cruel as to intrude upon such a honeymoon excursion, especially since you have hinted that they are all too few?"

Craighead broke in before Truth could speak. "I regret, more than I can express, that it has been necessary for me to leave my wife so much to herself, but from to-day"—here his eyes met Orchid's, flint with steel,—“matters will change for the better.”

"How perfectly enchanting!" cried she, with every appearance of sincerity. "And have I unwittingly played the part of good Samaritan, to rescue this bleeding conjugal felicity from the ditch of indifference? Well! I accept the responsibility, and will be guardian angel to both. You must bring the dear child around to me, at once! Shall we say next Thursday evening? You know I am always at home Thursday evenings, Van."

The angry color mounted to Van's brow, but his voice was steady as he answered:—

"You overwhelm us, Mrs. Wiley! But for the present, until Mrs. Craighead is more thoroughly acclimated, I think she had better not attempt to go out of an evening."

Truth shot him a glance of gratitude which did not escape the keen eyes of the visitor. Orchid rose suddenly, her silk garments rustling like a whole forest of dead leaves.

"Well, I see that I am to be defeated at every turn! I suppose, Van, it is too much to ask that Mrs. Craighead will let you come alone. Ah, I am bound up, heart and soul, in that tremendous case you are now working out! Continue to defy the law, and build on human frailty, and I predict an overwhelming success. Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Craighead! It has been a new sensation to meet you!" She lifted a curved hand to the level of Truth's chin.

"Shake hands, Truth," said Van, trying to smile. "That is the way they do it now."

The name "Truth" smote on Orchid's ear, and rang in her brain for many hours to come. Truth! An absurd, sentimental, old-fashioned name, yet how strangely appropriate! What a contrast to her own name,—Orchid!

Craighead accompanied her, as in duty bound, to the elevator door. All the way along the corridor she chattered like an excited magpie. "Van, I congratulate you! Such a charming child! Such simplicity of manner! And what innocent trustfulness!"

Van groaned inwardly.

"You did n't tell me half the romance of your courtship and marriage. But I will not grumble now that Mrs. Craighead's frankness has enlightened me. Is she equally communicative to all visitors?"

Orchid kept her hand on the electric button a moment before she rang, and spoke now in a lower tone.

"You need not fidget, Van! I did n't tell her much. I saw that she would be keen enough in drawing inferences. But you need fear nothing, if you'll only let

me be a friend to you both. Remember, I'm always alone on Thursdays."

Her face wore a look of sweet trustfulness, almost equal to Truth's, as she gazed straight up into his eyes. But Van's face was marble. He had not trusted himself to speak a word.

He remained outside in the corridor until he was sure that she had left the hotel, and then hurried down into the office to give the order for an open carriage.

CHAPTER XII

AN EXPERIMENT UNDER GLASS

ON the afternoon of the next day Van der Weyde Craighead swung off a car at Arlington Street, and began to make his way through the beds of brilliant crocuses, tulips, and hyacinths with which, carefully transplanted from suburban greenhouses, the curators of the Public Garden had dared to defy King Frost's waning sovereignty. The smell of the upturned earth was pungent with life. In a single night Spring's bridal tunic had, by fairy looms, been woven. Craighead was bent on a master-move of strategy.

Passing the Ether Monument, he came out on that sunniest part of Beacon Street which fashionable residents are abandoning to fashionable dressmakers, suffering it to connect, as it were, by the handle of a dumb-bell, the two aristocratic bulks of the Milldam and Beacon Hill. At the door of one of the last of these ancestral palaces Craighead rang. He was ushered into a long, rectangular room panelled to the ceiling in dull mahogany, and hung with curtains of yellow many shades darker than the ancient gilt picture-frames. The centre of the polished floor was raised by an enormous camel's-hair rug, once the property of Napoleon Third, whose vandal legions had borrowed it, according to tradition, from the audience chamber of the summer palace at Peking. Across this spongy bed of brown dragons a pleasant-looking, middle-aged lady advanced to meet him.

"Why, my dear Van! You are a stranger, indeed! The Judge and I were speaking of you this morning, and wondering when you would deign to break the seclusion of your honeymoon."

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Adams!" replied Craighead, in his most impressive manner. "I have been more than ungrateful! But Mrs. Craighead was quite worn out with nursing a sick grandmother, and the Judge knows how pressing has been this matter of recovering her estate. I have come now to announce that we are domiciled at the Hanover, that she is quite rested, and most anxious to make your acquaintance."

Mrs. Adams smiled pleasantly. "My dear boy, it is I who am to blame. Of course, I knew that you were at the Hanover, — who in Boston does not know? — and I should have been to call on your little bride long before this, but for the endless succession of clubs, lectures, and charities that we worldly women crowd into the one short space of Lent. I declare, I will cut the Metaphysicians, and go to her at once."

"No, not quite so soon," Van laughed. Then his face sobered. "May I not talk to you of her a little, first? I feel the need of a woman's advice, and I hoped that you would be willing to give it."

"I shall feel extremely hurt if you do not let me know everything that I can do for her. My mother, you may remember, was from Louisiana. There is a free-masonry in our warm-blooded race unknown to you individualistic Yankees."

"Oh, if you will help me!" said Van, almost boyishly. "You see, I have to leave her alone so much, — the Simpson case, you know, — and she is in sore need of a clear-headed and experienced friend to guide her through the bewilderment of her first impressions. Boston is such a labyrinth! She is only a child, as yet, and her education less than rudimentary. But she is unusually responsive, and I cannot imagine a more delightful problem for such an expert as you than the transplanting of this little thirsty wild-flower into the soil of Athenian culture."

"Is *that* all you want? How modest!" cried the lady, with sarcastic playfulness. "A sort of yellow-aster, green-

carnation soul development! My concern for her will be much more weighty, I assure you; namely, how she is to dress, and whether she gets proper physical exercise, and how she may best preserve her spontaneity. You men haven't the least idea what goes to make up a charming woman! But you are right in this, my dear Van, — I believe I am just the chaperone she needs. I can introduce her to all desirable circles without committing her to any. She shall taste of the native elixir, yet not be stiffened into marble! I am anxious to get to the task. When shall we begin?"

"You have taken a load as big as the State House from my heart!" exclaimed the young man with a great sigh of genuine relief. "Had you denied me, I should not have known where to turn. What I propose now is this: that, waiving all ceremony, you drop into dinner with us this evening, at seven. Bring the Judge, too, if he will come."

"I accept with pleasure, though I have my doubts about the Judge. The poor man seldom has an evening in peace."

Van rose to depart, repeating phrases of gratitude. His farewell hand-grasp — it seemed to him the ratification of a treaty — left his hostess's plump fingers in a numbed condition.

"Mistress Circe is foiled for once!" he thought triumphantly, as he sped over the hill to his office. His good humor did not escape the junior partner. "How much longer are you going to keep your wife cooped up in those pigeon-holes?" that youth inquired. "Other people might like to get a glimpse of her once in a while."

"Come up, by all means, my boy! Come up to-night and have dinner with us!"

Norton eyed him sarcastically. "I congratulate you on having sense enough at last to take a hint. I've hinted for weeks. Thank you! I come!"

A few hours later, Craighead, comfortably arrayed for

the evening, ushered through the door of his dainty suite the same gray-haired ambassadress that in the afternoon had pledged him the support of her family prestige.

"Truth, my dear, this is Mrs. Judge Adams, my best and truest friend, who has kindly consented to be your sponsor in your Boston *début*."

"So this is Van's wife!" said Mrs. Adams, and took the girl's hand as if to forestall her welcome. "Why! she's nothing but a baby! Van,—" with a shake of her gray head toward the smiling husband,—"what business has a crusty old bachelor like you with this jasmine in his button-hole?"

The tone in which these words were uttered—and the kindly accompanying looks warmed Truth's heart. Still retaining her hand, Mrs. Adams went on. "Did Van tell you that we had signed a deed of transfer for your little person, my dear, and that you were to be my daughter? I have never had a daughter."

Truth's face was brighter than she knew. Her warm, childish instincts would have led her to throw herself into the kind arms before her, but she had had one experience of Van's lady friends, and was wary. So in response to the pleasant inquiry she answered, as she had first answered Orchid,—

"No, he did n't say a word."

"He is a wise man, then," remarked the lady. "Husbands always muddle things! Dreadful institutions, are n't they? I wonder why they were ever invented!"

Her arch manner of stating this revolutionary sentiment was irresistible. The two listeners broke into simultaneous laughter. Truth edged nearer.

"Go away, Van!" cried the chaperone. "I want Truth all to myself. Come over to the sofa, dear, and let me talk away some of that homesickness from your pretty eyes. We are going to be the greatest of friends. No one can resist me, once I have made up my mind to win. Now tell me all about grandma, and the South, and home;

and whether Van is good to you, and how you like Boston —”

In a moment more the two were seated, hand in hand, and, after a little coaxing, Truth was talking with an eagerness that brought arbutus buds to her pale cheeks.

As the banished Van re-entered to open the door to Norton's genial knock, Truth was exclaiming, “Yes, he takes me whenever he can. We had the most *bew-tee-ful* ride yesterday, out to the Fens, and Cambridge, and way out to a place called Milton. I wish we could live at Milton. It seemed to me like Paradise Found instead of Lost.”

The junior partner stood close by Truth's side in the elevator.

“I'm glad you are making friends,” he said kindly. “You could n't find a better one than Mrs. Adams. She's a *brick!*”

“Saucy boy!” murmured that lady; but she was smiling.

“Yes, Mrs. Adams has my full approval,” continued Norton; “but when it comes to Van, —” here he gave a furtive glance across the elevator, and lowered his voice in a theatrical manner, — “when it comes to Van, and you need any information, just you tip me the wink, Mrs. Craighead!”

Van glared over the head of the elevator boy.

“He does n't look like a villain, now, does he?” asked the youth, pathetically. “And yet, the dark and bloody deeds from whose dread consequences I've had to shield him —”

“Oh, cut it, Quin!” laughed Van. “Truth has n't learned to gauge idiots yet.”

“What! after three weeks of association with — er — with — er —?”

By this time the mosaic floor was reached. Van and Mrs. Adams walked on several feet in advance.

“I'm not afraid of his dark and bloody deeds,” said

Truth, looking her boyish companion full in the eyes; "but there is one thing I would like to ask you."

"Great Scott!" thought the youth, "is she going to take me up — here?"

"I want to ask you," went on Truth, whose own hurried earnestness blinded her to the fact that she had received no answer, "whether you think that he — Mr. Craighead, — has any enemies?"

Norton looked at her keenly. "If he has it's because they are jealous of his good fortune, and somebody's good looks!" he said in a meaning tone. "Some people can't forgive their friends for being happy. If ever you meet any such, don't you mind a word they say! And if they trouble you, just you come to me, and I'll settle them!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you so much!" whispered the girl, grateful and embarrassed in one. "Maybe I ought n't to have said anything —"

"Don't think that for a moment," said Norton, earnestly. "Van is like my own brother, and I want you to feel that way too, in time, — if you can."

"I almost do, already," she said, with sudden impulse. The eyes she lifted to his face were very beautiful.

The dinner, prepared to Van's order, was served in a private room. There were many dishes that Truth had never seen. Mrs. Adams and Norton kept up such a running fire of pleasantry that her shyness soon wore away, and she talked as naturally as in her latticed dining-room at home.

"What funny little bird-legs!" she exclaimed, looking with astonishment at a delicately garnished dish. "It seems a kind of pity to cut them off this way, don't it?"

Norton roared. "Those birds, Mrs. Craighead, are our nightingales of the Fens! Eat them; they will make you musical!"

"Now I see you're funnin'. What are they, Mis's Adams?"

"They are frogs' legs, my dear; and are considered a great delicacy."

"*Frawgs'* legs!" echoed Truth, in horror. "And do you really eat them?"

"Why, that's nothing! — nothing!" said Norton, airily. "When I was out West last year we were glad to eat anything, — frogs, lizards, beetles, tarantulas! —" here he wriggled his fingers in imitation of the motions of the last-named insect. "And as for rattlesnakes! — our *pièce de résistance* was a rattlesnake stew, flavored with horn-bugs!"

"Oh, hush, — *hush!*" the girl cried, shuddering violently, but laughing the while. "Make him hush, Mis's Adams!"

"I'm silent," replied the incorrigible one. "More frogs' legs, please! I may be asked to sing to-night."

After dinner, when Norton and Craighead had retired to the latter's study for a congenial smoke, Mrs. Adams again sat with Truth's hand resting confidently in her own.

"I want to tell you, my dear," said the elder lady, "the little I have been able to gather from Judge Adams about — your uncle. The Judge, you know, was his executor."

Truth started and turned pale. This was a subject she would have shrunk from raising; but, forced upon her now, it filled her with painful curiosity.

"You have been brought up to think him a bad man, and a traitor," Mrs. Adams went on. "The truth is he was a most exemplary citizen, giving away in unostentatious charity the greater portion of his income."

"Don't you reckon it was just — repentance?" in a very low voice.

"He was always a retiring man, but scrupulously honorable. Nothing in the world could make him swerve from what he thought to be right. He was loyal to the Union, and could not approve of his state's secession. It

was his very love for the South that filled him with such grief at her error."

Truth withdrew her hand. "We Southerners do not call it — error!" she said stiffly. "My uncle was a traitor, and a disgrace to his family! One reason why I can't be happy is because I feel that I am livin' off blood-money."

"My mother was a Southerner, too, dear child. I do not forget that. But when you are as old as I you will be able to look at these questions more fairly, and realize that there may have been good, noble men on both sides."

"Not on the Yankee side!" said Truth, stubbornly. "Grandpa said that the whole Yankee army was made up of escaped convicts and hired negroes. It was Yankee money and overpowering numbers that beat us! Oh, it was a cruel, wicked war!"

"Bless me! what a ferocious little rebel!" cried the elder lady, half shocked and half amused.

The advent of the two gentlemen turned conversation into less dangerous channels.

"The great trouble with Boston," said Norton, swinging himself into an easy-chair, "is that it's not American at all, but warmed-over English!"

"Irish, you mean," suggested Van.

"No; English! What part have we in prairies, pork, and silver? We read the 'Athenæum' instead of the 'Book-man,' and we can't bear the hang of any but London 'twousers'! I've a mind to migrate to Montana."

"Quincy!" rebuked Mrs. Adams, severely, "you know that what you complain of is Boston's glory! It is her cosmopolitan outlook that gives her leadership. Be grateful for your privilege of keeping in touch with the best the world affords! Thank Heaven! Ideas can flow as freely across the Atlantic as wheat and gold! I've no patience with provincialism."

"That's what I mean," retorted Norton. "Boston is an English province! All we lack is a Governor-General!"

"Shame!" cried Mrs. Adams. "And what kind of a

province is Montana, — Chicagoese? And is n't Chicago itself a German province? And is n't Germany even a province of the eternal Greek Empire? No; in spite of your unpatriotic slanders, we do not kneel to any lesser monarch than Plato!"

"There it is again! Plato! a blarsted foreigner! I appeal to you, Mrs. Craighead; should n't good Americans read American books?"

Truth was as excited as though responsibility for all mankind rested upon her answer.

"I didn't know there was many — American books, except Audubon," she said.

A simultaneous shout from her three companions! She shrank back, a little confused.

"Oh, how could you go back on me so?" fell Norton's reproach.

"Bravo! The girl's put her finger on the very point!" rose Mrs. Adams's exultation.

"I am sure you saw plenty in the Library the other day," remarked Van.

When Mrs. Adams at last made a move toward departure, she held Truth's hand affectionately in both her own. "I shall call for you to-morrow at nine," she said, "and introduce you to several of your future classes. Though there be no American literature, barring Emerson, Hawthorne, and Audubon, you will find that the rest of the world has produced some very good books."

"Remember," said Norton, *sotto voce*, to his youthful hostess, while her husband was engaged in helping Mrs. Adams into a big cloak, "you are to discount nine-tenths of all that these Boston gossips tell you, especially if it purports to concern Van."

Mrs. Adams was as good as her word; and Truth now entered upon the most amazing curriculum ever devised for a poor little timid Alabama princess. She was dressed in gray flannel, and set to scale ladders in the Swedish gymna-

sium. Her accent was broadened to true Demosthenic resonance at the School of Expression. She took piano lessons of Mr. Bang in Chickering Hall, who supplanted her former studies in effete German sentimentalism with the neo-Italian classics of Sgambati. By special arrangement she went out twice a week to Radcliffe College for a course of Synthetic History and Science; while her private reading, confined to English literature, was pursued under her mentor's direct supervision. Of course she attended many of the "Lowell Lectures," and was honored with membership in the Shawmut Art Students' Association.

Warily, and little by little, Mrs. Adams introduced her to some of Boston's most noted people; but it was the very exigencies of such aristocratic acquaintance that formed the only distasteful portion of her career. She even ventured to remonstrate with her benefactress.

"You see, they don't like me. Look how they all stare! And, when I talk, they listen to my mistakes in grammar, instead of to what I am saying. I feel like an object under glass."

"It's your own over-sensitiveness, my dear. They don't mean anything by it. They are all interested in you and would like to help you. Just don't think of yourself at all, be as natural as you would with "grandma," and they will like you for your own true worth, perhaps all the better for your occasional mistakes. It's piquant!"

"Don't you think I might wait until I have learned just a little bit more?"

"Certainly not! This social training is exactly what you need. Consider it part of your School of Expression, an exercise in self-confidence."

Van seemed to take much interest, both in her deportment and her studies. His slightest hint was treasured in her memory with scrupulous fidelity.

"Always look people squarely in the eyes when you

“speak to them,” he said one day. “I have noticed that, especially with strangers, you sometimes let your glance fall, or shift about, as you enter a room.”

“But won’t people think I am staring at them?” she asked, recalling how often, as a child, she had been rebuked for indulging in this very rudeness.

“No, — not in Boston, at all events. If you don’t meet their eyes, they will think you have something to conceal. Now look straight at me!”

Truth did so, her large eyes clear and green as a pool under willows. Van looked into them, and thought of another pair, green also, but how different! Truth’s were like a mountain tarn, pellucid, wherein a gazer might discern the fine white sun-flecked sand-drift of her innocent heart; the other’s, emerald sea-water, opaque, restless, hinting of strange secrets beneath, and ominous with the possibility of blinding tempests.

The Craigheads had tacitly combined to parry Mrs. Wiley’s persistent advances. Her first visit was returned at an hour when Van knew she was likely to be absent, and Truth’s almost unbroken series of lessons and lectures rendered Orchid’s subsequent visits abortive. With this leader of the modern ultra-fashionables Mrs. Adams was not intimate. Evening invitations had been declined on various pretexts.

The first social encounter was at a Thursday afternoon reception of Mrs. Tooter’s. Here one was always sure of finding the itinerant lions of theatrical and operatic shows, or Major Pond’s latest Anglo-literary importation, and here Mrs. Adams had decided, for once, to take Truth, saying, as something of an excuse, “It is our nearest approach to a modern salon in Boston.”

Orchid was already there, and at sight of Truth gave a little start, checked an exclamation, and then hurried forward with hands outstretched. Her voice was a little louder than necessary as she cried: —

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Craighead! Do I really see you at last? I had begun to think you a myth."

Truth's eyes met hers pleasantly and frankly. "I have almost begun to think myself one, Mrs. Wiley, in your wonderland of Boston." Her voice and manner already showed the results of careful training.

"Evidently it agrees with you. I never saw so great an improvement in so short a time. It is marvellous, — marvellous!"

Many people turned to stare, and Truth felt the blood rush in a burning torrent to her cheeks.

"Van was always a superb teacher," continued Mrs. Wiley in a lower tone, as if in a sort of pensive reverie. "And how you are developing, physically! There is nothing like love to bring out the spirituelle in one's face."

Truth glanced about miserably. "Have you, — have you seen Mrs. Adams? She went off somewhere."

"Professor Choice has just led her into a corner. That means at least half an hour of metaphysics. But surely you don't want to leave yet, when I have just found you!"

Truth did not attempt a reply.

"I hear that Mrs. Adams has installed herself as chief guide, philosopher, and friend."

"She is more than good to me," said Truth, fighting down her nervousness.

"You are fortunate indeed! Mrs. Adams is so exclusive! Her taste in dress, too, is remarkable, — so antique and patrician!"

Suddenly Truth's face flashed into such brilliancy of joy and relief, that Orchid wheeled about to find the cause. It was Norton, bearing down on them through the crowd. Truth could not wait for him to reach them, but struggled in his direction through silk, lace, jet, and broadcloth, her eyes never losing themselves from his. Orchid stood where she had been left, and watched the scene with a smile that was not good to see.

Norton's glowing face was a replica of Truth's. "Here you are at last," he said in a voice that rose over the ceaseless patter of commonplaces. "Beastly jam, isn't it? I've been looking for you for an hour."

Truth did not answer, but her eyes still hung on his with a look of mute thankfulness for her deliverance. More than one smile and pair of meaning looks were exchanged in the crowd, but Norton and Truth went off together with the satisfaction of comrades who have chanced upon each other in a gloomy wood.

Three months had passed, — three wonderful, vivid, distracting months, in which Truth had been caught up as a leaf in a golden whirlwind. New thoughts, new possibilities, new powers, new ambitions, swept in upon her. Her mind was of that crystalline texture that absorbs and holds unlimited quantities of impinging light, throwing it back and forth in a thousand lucent reflections from its delicately adjusted facets. She wondered that the strangeness of its revelations should often seem so familiar, as if of a world hers by birthright, whose atmosphere she had always unconsciously breathed. If the multiplicity of impressions became at times confusing, her mental vigor remained unimpaired.

Physical culture, too, brought exhilaration. Not even her childish romps in the woods, with the sadly missed dogs, had given her such a keen sense of life as the long walks she now took out through Cambridge and Brookline, where she gloried consciously in the muscular energy of each elastic step, breathing in with each great draughts of air, fresh from the Appalachian peaks. Looking westward from the summit of Corey Hill, she marvelled at the miles of suburban palaces crusting a landscape which Mrs. Adams remembered, only a decade ago, as sacred to sequestered farms and ancient apple-orchards; or, peering far out under her arched hand into the tossing purple horizon, she wondered how often Leif Ericson from that

self-same spot had tried in vain to pierce the mystery that beleaguered his lonely colony of a thousand years ago.

And yet the essentials of her character were not changed. The sweet simplicity, purity, and honesty of her Southern nature reacted as healthily as ever against the temptations of her new environment. Her unconscious loyalty to ideas grew only the deeper with her release from narrow association and formal rigidity. A thousand adjuncts of belief were modified for her, and broadened, and at times she felt herself a mere thistle-down at the mercy of rival and entangling currents; but through the rifts of even her giddiest clouds, she never lost sight of the great firm planet of faith beneath her. Perhaps, too, it was sometimes a fresh sense of humor that saved her from mental extravagance. Her comments on her fellow-Athenians often excited Mrs. Adams's mirth.

"Don't you think that these Unitarians," she inquired with some concern, "seem very anxious to make people think they are not Christians?"

"Yes, perhaps," said Mrs. Adams, laughing. "But what would you say of my dear Professor Choice?"

"Well," replied Truth, thoughtfully, "I like and admire him, of course. But somehow he makes me feel as if the whole world has been degenerating ever since the days of Pericles, and it is all my fault."

But it was the Christian Scientists, the Theosophists, and the Brahmo-Buddhists that bewildered her the most. "I believe I really do have a strange chill down my back when I say my prayers in Sanscrit!" she declared. "That's a sign that you're about to split in two, like a butter-bean, and become a Dhyān Chohan!"

At another time, when she had returned from one of the most riotous sessions of the Browning Society, she related: "There was a funny little affected man from Harvard to-day, who told us, with tears in his eyes, that it was the Master's very transcendence of all human intelligence that made him the greatest of all seers. And

then all the old ladies smiled through their spectacles, and nodded to one another, just as if they knew what he was talking about. Just fancy!" Mrs. Adams marvelled at her rapid assimilation of words from the Boston dialect.

In art she learned to admire Monet immensely, appreciating with half-closed eyes the crumbling substance of his light, just as she had often watched her Southern sun veil in gold mist the heavier textures of hillside blooms. But she could not bear the hard, waxy, corpse-like bodies of the latest Paris figure-painting, reminding her, as she declared, of Fox's mediæval martyrs. Sargent's apocalyptic decorations in the Library affected her strangely. "I don't ever expect to know what it all means," she said earnestly. "Perhaps that's why I never get tired of studying it. All that chaotic mystery of wings, and lions, and shadowy creatures makes you try to remember something that must have been ages and ages ago, and just when your heart aches so that it seems about to burst and spill out the secret, then the old prophets step out from their places, and tell you that there is no use trying. I can't keep away from it! All the other frescos are like paper dolls." She detected just a little stuffing of bran in Millet's sentiment, at least as exhibited at the Art Museum; and a very offensive stage-rhodomontade among those old European masters which she had the misfortune to see there. But she was ready to worship before the clear beauty of Gilbert Stuart's George and Martha Washington. "Those are like my Virginia ancestors!" she exclaimed, "and how much finer the pictures are unfinished!"

She witnessed her first theatrical performance in Van's company, and her first orchestral concert under Mrs. Adams's gracious patronage. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, though she could not understand its construction, not even from the analysis of the learned programmist, came to her as a revealed world of ethereal quicksilver, which promised infinite revelations to come. But at Duse's unspeakable

restraint of passion in the ever-new study of Camille, she felt that her heart was broken forever. The effort she made to keep from weeping aloud almost exhausted her. On her way home in the carriage, she could not speak to Van, but held his left hand in a grasp that numbed it. She did not dare to bid him good-night at the door of her chamber, but in the morning told him gravely that she felt her one chance of gaining immortality was to become a tragic actress.

In accordance with this desire, Mrs. Adams took her one morning to the parlors of a Mrs. Sibyl Janes, who was then conducting a series of classes in Boston. Perhaps the most vivid impression of all Truth's career up to this point was made by her hour's conversation with this remarkable woman. Born in some little Western town, hardly yet thirty years old, with brown hair caught up like that of a Greek goddess, short of stature, with step springing as a deer's bound, her thought struck out with the clear keen blast of practical absoluteness. It swept clean away both low-lying theosophic miasmas, and the glittering cirrus flock of philosophic categories, and talked God-sense right out of the familiar ultimate blue.

With a graceful little apology to Mrs. Adams, she led Truth to an inner room. "So you want to become an actress?" she said, smiling. "It is my business to tell people how. Determine to express harmoniously every faculty of your being! That is the secret, and whether you practise it on the boards or in a drawing-room, you will find it your best watchword. Walk down fearlessly into the footlights of peoples' eyes! Birds always sing in tune, and their wings are graceful with the curves of least resistance. A drawing-room is the chief of all dramatic stages. Each character can exhibit its whole self at the moment of entrance. Stop jerking! And breathe slowly and calmly, as if you were taking the whole world into your lungs! When you have got it there, you can float. Don't stop to think what you are going to say! Don't

coop up your thoughts in your dressing-room; throw yourself out with them, and let them fly freely! Words will grow on them like feathers, — then you can skim any wave without touching it. Now, walk across the floor with me! There! No! — don't you see? You hitch at the waist, as if you wanted to go two ways at once! Planets don't wobble; they oscillate! Now, come right across to me as if you were a planet! Gli-i-i-de! No; again! Focus on me! Think only that you would rather shake my hand than do anything else in the world! Suppose me to be your dearest friend, who has suddenly appeared! Your grandmother, yes! Come, now! Straight as a bee to a flower! There you are! You're an actress already! Don't you see, the only use of living is to fill each moment with your singleness of soul?"

CHAPTER XIII

TRUTH MAKES A MISTAKE

IN the midst of all this mental expansion the seeds of growth in mutual regard between Van and Truth were sending forth tiny shoots of life, far, far below the surface of expression; pale tendrils, too deeply concealed, as yet, even for self-recognition. It did not occur to Truth to expect from her husband constant sympathy in the daily round of studies, still less in her private meditations, woes, and ecstasies. Sometimes, as they sat together in the evening, Van absorbed in papers which he had brought up from the office, she would look up shyly from her text-books, to gaze much longer than she knew upon that well-formed brow, behind which, she devoutly believed, were stored intellectual splendors that dwarfed her own most exalted thoughts into feeble rush-lights.

Once she mustered up courage to put a question to him. "Do you feel perfectly sure that God is immanent in all of us, Mr. Craighead?"

Van placed his fingers between the pages he was reading, and looked up with an abstracted countenance. Then seeing the earnest, wistful eyes fixed upon his, he smiled, and said kindly: "Is that what they fill you up with at Harvard? It sounds painfully like gibberish to me! I dare say it's true, but I would n't advise you to lose any sleep over it!"

Among her few choice acquaintances she had heard, more than once, her husband referred to as a "rising genius," "the brightest young lawyer in Boston," and her heart swelled with a strange pride. Occasionally when he accompanied her on social visits, his intellect seemed to

her to dominate the conversation. Truth was by nature a hero-worshipper; and, as she learned more of life and people, all virtues began to aggregate themselves about her conception of Van, and all evil to fly from it, as magnetic fragments from a south pole. What she had said to his father was pathetically true. She thought him the noblest, wisest, and most beautiful of mortals, and his marriage to her a crowning act of magnanimous condescension. She had long since substituted for her own his judgment concerning the acceptance of her uncle's fortune. The subject, however, was still a painful one, and she dwelt upon it as little as possible. Her greatest relief was in the reflection that Craighead had taken moral as well as intellectual responsibility upon himself. She trusted him absolutely. Had any one cruelly reminded her of her outbursts of anger against him during his first visit to the Big House, she would have hidden her face in her hands, and pleaded youth, ignorance, idiocy, — anything that could extenuate such impossible conduct. The old wild instincts and impulses seemed dead within her. She could not recognize her own memories of herself, and, not unnaturally, made the mistake of thinking the change deeper than it really was. If, at this time, she had included novel-reading among her many tasks and recreations, she might have begun to suspect the nature of her maturing feelings. The poor child thrilled to her husband's step in the hall, and watched him down the street with a quivering heart, believing all the time that she worshipped him afar, impersonally, as a transfigured Bodhisattva, all the more awe-inspiring from his very inscrutability.

Van had told her that he could not ask her to love him. She remembered this, and indeed every other detail of that breathless conversation. She wished he would sometimes talk of himself now. No; she would be afraid to hear! "Were I more romantic, I might tell you that my heart has been charred!" What could this mean but

that it had been burnt in some hopeless love? At least it was over now; a charred thing is cold. Even were this not so, how could she expect love from such a transcendent being? If he looked at her kindly, and spoke with a smile, it was enough.

As for Van, he had much satisfaction in the consciousness that Truth was improving. He felt that he was doing his full duty. Hadn't he toiled like a beaver to put her estate into such a condition that its income would eventually double? Had he not settled every cent of it upon her? And wasn't he working manfully now, that his profession might yield him sufficient support for their joint existence? He was genuinely thankful to her for the tact that kept her from making herself a bore. When the Simpson case was over he would have more time to give her. He was always interested in hearing reports of progress from Mrs. Adams.

Truth wrote frequently to her grandmother. Not all the bewilderment of this new life could draw from her heart one memory of the old home. Not only her grandparents, (she had not yet learned to think of the place without the Colonel), but the servants, — Uncle Norah, Aunt Big Mary, the cook, little Nickey; Black Betty, Moses the Mule; her dogs, the various cows each with a name and an individuality, her tame mocking-bird, which had never needed a cage, but, season after season, builded in the jessamine vine at the corner of the gallery, and came to her lightest whistle, — even the chickens and guinea-fowls were all remembered, and lovingly inquired about.

"Have the little white hyacinths by the bee-house started up yet?" she would ask. "It's just about time for them to be waking." Or again, "How is Uncle Norah? I was sorry to hear of his misery in the chest and am sending by this same mail a roll of plasters and some sweet syrup, that will please him even if they don't make him well."

But when she related Boston experiences, the strange words and lengthening sentences impressed and sometimes

alarmed the old lady. "My darling," she wrote, after one of these, "my most fervent prayer is that you may be kept unspotted from the world. Read your Bible as an antidote to the Unitarians, and write me often of the services at beautiful Trinity Church. I have hung the photograph of this sacred edifice in my bedroom, where I can see it all the time. All that you tell me of Mr. Craighead's kindness fills me with gratitude. In the arms of a good and loving husband you will find your earthly shelter from the perils of life."

As her shyness wore away Truth longed more and more to tell Van something of her budding ambitions. The thought of becoming a tragic actress had vanished long ago, but the days brought new hopes and plans. "He knows so much more than Mrs. Adams," she thought. But she felt it an impertinence to burden his tremendous issues with her petty interests. Yet he did not despise women. Mrs. Wiley had said — what had Mrs. Wiley said? She knew well enough. It was always ringing in her ears. "Van used always to argue his cases over with me before taking them into court." And his heart had been charred! Was this the fire? If so — But she would not think further.

She had begun to read the papers, searching eagerly for any mention of her husband, and treasuring in a secret corner of her desk all transcripts from his speeches. She bought a book entitled, "Every Man His Own Lawyer," and kept it concealed with the newspaper clippings. As she read, each dizzy page gave her a deeper respect for her husband, and a keener jealousy of Orchid. There was no doubt that, of all the people she met, this one woman alone had power to sting her. The most casual anecdote of Van's former life, uttered in those smooth, meaning tones, was a poisoned lash. She was never weary of hearing Mrs. Adams or Norton descant upon the same topic. Reason as she would, one smile, one languid intonation from this dazzling creature aroused in her such unhealthy fas-

cination, such strange thrills of pain and anger, that she was terrified at her own emotions.

Mr. Van der Weyde Craighead, advocate and orator, was again the theme of the Boston papers. The headlines of daily columns shrieked across billiard-rooms and private boudoirs. Newsboys shouted themselves hoarse, and bulletin boards were decked as with scarlet banners. It was a phenomenal success. For five months he had been fighting the most powerful corporation in Massachusetts; he alone, against a coalition of Boston's leading financiers and most astute big-wigs. It was one of those complicated modern cases that involve hidden contradictions in statute law, niceties of business principle, attacks on personal integrity, unearthing of domestic scandals, and counter-charges of perjury and blackmail. Craighead had become in the community an object of fear, hate, and adoration in equal proportions. In his final summary each opponent's peculiar weakness had been delicately extracted, and held up quivering on the point of his steely wit. The jury, conscious of similar weaknesses happily out of sight, chuckled with appreciation, and rendered a quick verdict in enormous damages for his client. This the judge sanctioned with a heavy seal and a heavier sigh.

"I've won my case!" said Van that evening to Truth across the little restaurant table. He was flushed with congratulations, and their inevitable accompaniment, drink. His face, usually pale, had velvety spots of red on each cheek, and his cold eyes were brilliant.

Truth gazed upon him as upon a god. She could have wept with joy that he had condescended to speak to her, — to her also, at last, — of his professional triumphs.

"Oh, I'm so glad! I've been reading all about it. Your speeches were just splendid!"

"Did you read them?" cried Van, in gratified surprise.

"I've been reading everything in the papers since it first began," answered Truth, with shy pride.

Van smiled as he ate his soup. Truth was restless. She must not let this golden opportunity slip by so easily. She plunged in again, headlong.

"And I'm so glad that it is all over at last. I felt so sorry for those nice gentlemen. Now that horrid man who told so many stories (she meant lies) will have to go back to prison, won't he?"

Van stopped short. His soup might have frozen in the spoon.

"What man?"

"Why, that wicked — Simpson, wasn't it? — who started the case against the company!"

"You had better confine your reading to fashion books and novels hereafter," he said angrily. "Simpson was my client, and I made him win!"

The dinner was finished in silence. Truth was struggling with her tears. "Now he will hate me and despise me forever," she thought in humiliated agony. "I might have known that I could not understand. I can't even make out 'Every Man His Own Lawyer'!" Yet in the very midst of her self-reproaches she was conscious of something incredible in the fact that Van had defended such a villain. The thought tortured her with fatal curiosity.

"I see that I must have been mistaken in thinking Mr. Simpson such a bad man," she ventured to explain, soon after reaching their apartments. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Craighead."

Van glanced at her warily. "I did n't say he was not a bad man."

"But you would not have taken up for him so if he had been really bad, — I know!"

"A lawyer's got to earn his living. He can't choose his clients any more than a doctor. If Simpson was a liar, can't you see that I've been doubly successful?"

Truth was chilled. She refused to accept the inevitable intuition, — it was too awful!

"But," she still pleaded, leaning forward, her whole clear, untainted soul in her eyes, "if you had known for *sure* that he was a bad man, that he had done wrong, you would n't have tried to prove him in the right, would you?"

Van did not answer at once, nor did he lift his eyes. A curious expression came into his face; it suggested amusement, slight contempt, and perhaps something a little truer and deeper than these, though less easily defined.

Truth was waiting in agonized suspense. "Oh, say that you would n't!" she breathed.

Craighead regarded her coldly and steadily. He was not a man to accept criticism of his methods.

"I guess that I should have done exactly as I thought best."

Two crimson discs sprang into Truth's cheeks. She felt like a slapped child.

For a moment there was uncomfortable silence; then Craighead walked over to a window and, looking down into the light-starred street, said carelessly:—

"I've half promised to make some calls this evening. I presume you would not care to go?"

"No," answered Truth in a choked voice, "I could n't go."

He went without saying good-bye, and as the door slammed behind him she cast herself prone upon the bed.

"Oh, I was a fool,—a *fool*!" she sobbed. "What right have I to blame him? I'm not old enough to understand! I'm not fit to be his wife! And now he's gone away—to *her*. She will know just what to say. She won't make mistakes. Oh, I wish I was dead! I wish I was back home!"

Meanwhile Van, without any very clear idea of a destination, was making his way down Boylston Street. The cool night air revived him, the sharp wind drove from his brain the hovering mists of wine and flattery. Truth's

words had been a discordant blast, harsh as a cry of fire against seductive music. He frowned away the ghosts she had evoked.

That afternoon, in the very thick of the court-room congratulations, a scented blue note had been slipped into his hand. When he looked around, the messenger had vanished. He had no need to open the missive, he knew the contents already. "Will my old friend refuse to let me offer the warmest congratulations that the whole world affords? I shall be at home this evening after eight." At the time he had thrust it hastily into a pocket. He lifted his hand to his waistcoat. Yes, it was still there! He had been too late to dress for dinner.

It was Thursday evening, that evening of each week that had once belonged to him alone. And she was waiting! Unconsciously his vigorous steps slackened into something like indecision. He could almost see her in that Oriental boudoir, moving about in the sinuous witchery of trailing gold and sea-green gauze, peering into one of a dozen brass-bound mirrors to catch back an escaping flame of her riotous hair, throwing herself with carefully studied carelessness upon the pillow-heaped divans, that one dainty foot might learn to escape from the encrusted drapery, then leaning forward, alert, eager, for the fancied whir of the electric door-bell. He turned, still slowly, into a narrow street running to the left.

At the corner of Commonwealth Avenue another figure collided with him. It was Norton.

"Why, Van! Whither bound? Just rushing up to your house,—the boys sent me. Have you forgotten election to-night at the St. Botolph? We are thinking of putting you up for president. How's that for the firm of Craighead and Norton?"

His arm was already through that of his senior partner. Van gave a grim smile.

"I was just on the way," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

MIGRATORY BIPEDS

FASHIONABLE Boston had long been emptying itself from Beacon Street tombs and apartment house cells. Like over-fed or over-trained fowls, with wings half atrophied from disuse, the freed occupants flapped feebly up and down sea-beaches and along mountain slopes, pleased with the thought that they could so easily become children of nature. Viewed by the eye of Nature herself, however, it was a sorry throng that Dame Fashion had sent back for repairs. How the real birds must laugh to see these self-satisfied abnormalities on the long hotel verandas, strutting and pecking at one another, shaking out their gilded feathers, and sometimes, though rarely, making a pathetic effort to rise from the ground! Old hens, with silly chicks at heel, pecked other hens for a choice grain of social preferment, while male members of the brood, standing warily apart, dodged pecks in turn, and frankly longed for the familiar office-perches in Devonshire or Milk Street.

All the schools and lecture-rooms in Boston were closed. What use has the stay-at-home fowl for the etiquette of poultry shows? Truth, being for the present one of the humbler variety in that she could not be persuaded to leave, bitterly regretted the cessation of her classes. For Boston was entering on its summer nap. A hush, broken only by the fitful, sleepy click of a Back Bay horse-car, crept like invisible weeds and mosses over the Romanesque temples of the deserted city. The heated streets turned to dusty steam the well-meant

spatterings of water-carts ; and the few remaining denizens seemed glad to share the tropic listlessness of the season.

But Truth was not listless. A feverish energy, a baulked ambition, urged her toward deeper and more comprehensive study. It was no longer the pure joy of spontaneous development, but rather the unhealthy pangs of Macedonian world-hunger, that seemed to challenge her into an attempt to master the vague Oriental secrets of life and knowledge.

Driven from Radcliffe and the School of Expression, she explored for reading materials among the yellow onyxes and the kaleidoscopic Parsifals of the Public Library. At night, by the unsteady incandescence of the economized electric lights, she devoured the literary spoils she had been able to extort from the languid delivery clerks. Some of these were novels, — her first novels, — mostly unobnoxious ones of Italian scene, Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*, and something of Marion Crawford. But novels, history, science, philosophy, — Fichte's absolute Ego, or the toy-balloon Ego of Amiel, — it was all one to her ; just as every nodding forest mystery is eloquent to the strained faculties of its first prisoner. So did this dauntless little Ponce de Léon stagger through tropic bewilderments of poetry and romance, and bottomless bogs of specious metaphysics to some fount, hidden deep in her blind faith, of the soul's eternal youth.

After a few weeks Van, engrossed though he was in his own studies, was forced to notice and comment upon her deepening pallor, and insisted upon a month at one of the comfortable seaside hotels of Swampscott or Nahant. Truth feared the latter peninsular resort, having heard it spoken of by epicures as "*Cold Roast Boston* ;" and even the name "*Marblehead*" had a forbidding, Palladian, pseudo-classic ring. It was in vain that Van promised to come down and join her over Sundays. The excuse she gave was that she could not leave the Library

and the Art Museum. She was excavating something, she knew not what, among deposits of Greek crateræ and amphoræ, mysterious fragments of gigantic Hathors, and imperial hierophants in purple syenite.

Mrs. Adams, who had remained in the city for reasons of her own, noticed the insidious change in the young wife's appearance, and, though asking no questions, understood well that the madness of intellectual acquisition had seized another victim, and would soon drag her down to mental suicide, where the soul, stricken and fascinated, gazes, helpless, into the whirling vortex of other men's thoughts. One evening she deliberately planned a call that would make her seem to happen in upon the Craigheds at the relaxation of dinner. She came in panting, declaring that Hamlet's wish, about to be realized in her own flesh, was by no means provocative of the relief apparently foreseen by that all too solid Dane. The faces of the young people, who were almost alone in the oppressively large hall, brightened with unaccustomed pleasure, and Van sprang up to place an extra chair. Accepting the refreshment of an Apollinaris lemonade, the visitor plunged into it, and her subject together.

"Van, up to your ears as usual?"

Mr. Craighead smiled professionally, yet affably. "I believe that just about expresses it."

"I thought so. See what comes of making smart speeches! And you couldn't leave town even for a few weeks?"

"Certainly not! I'm disgusted with speeches, and I'm working out into a new line. The Judge knows —"

"Oh, never mind what the Judge knows! I only wanted to find out what you are going to do with this poor tired child." She laid her hand affectionately on Truth's arm.

Van's tone changed perceptibly. "I've been trying for weeks to get her to run off somewhere."

"And she does n't dare to brave the Yankee summer-

resort without you? Ah, I understand." Mrs. Adams nodded sagely.

"She says she can't leave Boston because of her studies. But I see plainly that she is not going to be able to stand the whole summer here."

"Stand it? Of course she can't! Look at those pale cheeks and hollow eyes!"

Truth flushed. "I'm nearly always pale," she remonstrated, "even at home."

"That may be; but people in the North should have red cheeks. You're reading too much. Reading isn't half as good as seeing. Now what do you say to going abroad with me next week? I've got a cabin!"

"What! Do you really mean it?" cried Van, the smile on his face deepening with genuine gratitude. "Well, I don't know how to thank you! There could n't be a better solution, — that is, if Truth is willing to go."

But Truth was silent, staring into vacancy.

"Abroad!" she whispered after a moment. "Abroad! Do you mean to Europe? to England and Italy?"

"Yes, of course, anywhere! We'll just take a run over to Paris first —"

"Paris!" gasped the girl. Mrs. Adams spoke of Paris as if it were just down the harbor, accessible as Nantasket Beach.

"Yes, Paris! And if it's not too warm we'll go on to Vienna, and down into Italy. How would you like a little of Switzerland and Mont Blanc by the way?"

Truth's eyes were a sibyl's, dilating with a thousand instantaneous prophecies. She had dreamed of mountains, real mountains, all her life, without realizing clearly that they were indeed a part of the big old earth on which she lived. They, together with Europe and the ancient cities, seemed to belong to a world of distant romance. Suddenly she covered her eyes with her handkerchief, as if to hide some ecstasy of inner vision.

Mrs. Adams was chuckling with satisfaction at the effect of her words.

"Well, young lady, what shall we say? Only this morning I got the offer of a state-room from a friend who is delayed until next boat, and I must decide at once. Will you go?"

Without answering, Truth unveiled her eyes and gazed into her husband's face with a sort of dazed appeal. It was the Jeanne d'Arc again! What did it see?

"Go, by all means!" he smiled. He felt distinct satisfaction that she had thus appealed to him, even though her soul were winged with unuttered prayers.

She looked at him long, and then at Mrs. Adams. "I can't believe it!" she said. "I don't know who I am. Paris and Venice! They seem as far away as the sun and the planets. Does n't it take a very long time to go?"

"Oh, no! You hardly realize you're started before you're there. One does n't even have time on board to write letters for the return trip. I've been over dozens of times. Many of my friends do their spring shopping in Paris."

Truth gasped again. This disregard of time and space seemed almost blasphemous. Then, turning to Van, she said, "I will decide to go then, if you are sure you don't mind."

When the energetic chaperone had departed, and the two young people were alone in their pretty rooms, Truth made yet one more appeal. She went up to him, and put her hand — which shook a little — on his coat-sleeve. "You are *sure* you don't mind my going, in the very least?" she asked, with bewitching and almost tearful timidity.

"Not in the very least!" he answered. "It will do you all the good in the world."

His words were encouraging, but they did not make Truth altogether happy. "I need not have asked," she thought bitterly. "Of course he will not miss me!"

Now that she was committed to the voyage, a hundred doubts and fears assailed her. Would not her grandmother oppose the long and perilous journey? Suppose the old lady should fall ill again. Then, was it right for her to start off in this way and leave Van, even though he urged it? Suppose, too, that he should fall sick! It was hard to leave him, or rather to think of leaving him. How many weeks might she be away? He had shut her off from his intellectual work, but she felt the same keen interest in all that she could learn of him from newspapers and the conversation of friends. The memory of the Simpson case rankled. This had never entirely left her. It stung, at times, like an old burn, and all her childish faith and womanly ingenuity were needed to convince and re-convince her that Van was blameless. Hers was a nature that could not afford to doubt. She could bear not to be loved, but it was a necessity to her to love, and to idealize. Little by little, through these past bewildering weeks in Boston, her husband's dark, cold face had grown to be the central reality of her life, the rock where all vines clung, against which all flowers blossomed. His reserve only added to his charm.

"Of course he will not miss me," she had said to herself humbly enough. But lurking in the background of her thoughts was a motive, by no means so humble.

She was to sail in a week. One morning Truth hurried at an unfashionably early hour to her friend, Mrs. Adams, bent ostensibly on some trivial errand incident to preparations for the voyage, but in reality to ask a question which had tormented her most of the previous night.

She found the worthy matron in an upper chamber entirely surrounded by an angular sea of pasteboard boxes.

"Come in!—No, you can't. Wait until I make a

passage through the débris! — There! — See, I am actually buying a ready-made gown! Think of it! Never did such a thing in my life before — but the dress-makers are all off summering with their ill-gotten gains."

"I just ran in a minute to ask what I ought to wear," explained the visitor. "I haven't many things, you know. Of course it must be black!"

"No, you sha'n't cling to that saturnine and antediluvian color longer, child!" Truth winced. "However, we need n't discuss that now. Wear anything that will cover you decently until we get to Paris, and then —" the lady paused and winked — "it will be time enough to see what we shall see!"

"I — I wanted to ask you one other question, Mrs. Adams." Truth fixed her clear eyes upon the elder woman. There was a hint of distressed shrinking in her gaze that Mrs. Adams knew well. "Please don't laugh at me."

"I dare say I shall, child," cried the lady. "What is it now, — whether decent women ever talk about corsets, or whether belief in reincarnation renders one an infidel?"

"Not those — again!" said Truth, confused and blushing. "I only wanted to know if married people — up North here — go to see each other."

"Do married people go to see each other! What do you mean? Certainly they do. You can't think that all social functions are confined to babes and celibates!"

"That is n't it — I mean — do — do married men ever go to see — young married ladies?"

"Oh — Oh," cried Mrs. Adams, in a long breath, "that's a horse of a different color!"

"Whom is the poor child afraid of?" darted through her fertile mind. "I have it! It's that red-headed Wiley woman."

She paused in order to arrange her words in some

relation to veracity, and at the same time make them reassuring.

"Why, my dear, what a queer question! Of course some people may, but there are others that disapprove. You can't possibly lay down any rule. It's harmless enough, I dare say."

But Truth was not comforted. "I don't think it's right!" she protested. "I don't believe people do it down home."

The day of departure arrived. They were to sail directly from Boston by the "*Cephalonia*" of the Cunard line. Mrs. Adams and the Judge were to meet Truth and Craighead on board. Norton had already sent an exquisite box of flowers, and endless packages of Huyler's sweetmeats. Van had been most energetic, giving directions to bell-boys, sending for extra wraps and rugs, and so engrossing himself with every minute detail of departure, that poor Truth's heart was fairly bursting with admiration and gratitude. Yet in many ways it was a poignant reminder of those unspeakable days at Dexterville when, in a similar way, he had assumed the executive.

Now that the hour of departure was really here, it seemed to Truth a crisis in her life hardly less acute than the morning of her marriage. She found herself wishing for the old red rooster. The longing for a parting embrace from Mrs. Dexter was too intense to bear even the weight of conscious thought.

Van and Truth had made a pretence of eating breakfast together, but the girl had not swallowed a mouthful. When the trunks had gone, a dreadful silence fell upon the little apartment. Truth went into her bed-chamber. The neat emptiness smote her with a chill. She closed the door softly, and knelt by the dismantled bed to pray; but she had lost the power of forming new petitions, and could only say over and over again the inconsequent rhymed prayers of her childhood. They conveyed little

or no meaning, but the very repetition soothed her. She rose, and passed into Van's room. There were his clothes hanging in the open closet, his slippers waiting cosily by the big chair, and a book on International Law turned down at an open page upon the table. Truth choked back a sob. Whether she were near or far, alive or dead, he would live on as usual. She was but an incident in his existence.

Van, at this moment, was pacing restlessly up and down the drawing-room. Every few moments he went to the front window to peer down expectantly for the carriage. He felt nervous, ruffled, and a little irritated, as most men do when their routine is broken. Truth came in noiselessly, her left hand pressed against her heart, her face like wax. She felt as if death had already seized her. Her lips moved, and Van bent to listen.

"If grandma gets very sick — will you go to her — for a little while?"

"Indeed I will, at once. Don't worry about that an instant!" She put out one hand toward him; he took it in both his own. The action reminded her that she had forgotten her gloves.

"My gloves!" she cried, glancing restlessly about. "Where are my gloves? I left them here. It's time to put them on."

"Here they are," said Van, briskly, picking them up from under her very nose.

She was trembling, so that she had to lean up against the table. He came nearer, and put his arm around her.

"What's the matter, dear? Are you ill?"

"No! — no! It's only — leaving you — and grandma!"

"Poor little girl!" If she had dared to look up, she would have seen his face soften with unaccustomed tenderness.

"You were so good to us — before — down South!" she choked out. "I don't think I've ever done any-

thing to show you — how I thanked you. And you've been good to me here, too. I've tried — I've tried — not to be any trouble to you." Her speech faded off into a strained whisper.

"Trouble!" cried Van, touched at her distress. "You dear little girl! Do you think you ever could have been any trouble to me? You have been nothing but a blessing and an advantage. It is I who have n't done half enough."

"No! no!" sobbed the girl, fairly clinging to him, "you must not say that! You are the finest man in the whole world. It is I who owe you everything — everything."

"Now look here, Truth!" said Van in a firmer voice, "don't go off with any such absurd idea! You are a great heiress, and a beauty besides. Everybody thinks me a lucky man to have won you. All the property is yours, and I am only a poor, hard-working husband —"

"No! no! You can't say that! You must n't say that! It's all yours. You know it. I never wanted it, and I don't want it now. It's yours. Oh, please, please don't say it is mine again!"

Craighead was astonished at her vehemence. She clung to him desperately. Her sobs were growing hysterical. She was conscious of this, and wished to control herself, but thought that, if she stopped, his arms might unloose themselves. It was such a new, such a wonderful thing to feel her own husband's arms around her.

"Hush! little one!" he said. "Don't sob so! Listen! I want to talk to you."

She stifled her sobs to long, irregular shudders. Van did not loose his arms.

"Truth!" — his voice was very gentle, — "you must n't think so humbly of yourself. I don't want you to. You are a great heiress, and, what is better, a good, true, sweet woman. Mrs. Adams considers your mind a most extraordinary one. Do you remember I told your grandpa

that you ought to have a European tour? You see by her letters that your grandma delights in this opportunity for you. And I'll tell you what *I* expect of you, Truth. That you learn on this trip what shall go far toward making you my intellectual equal. Remember, I have never been abroad. So, if one of us is to be humble, it should be I."

Van humble! this demigod! "No," she cried once more, "you are only trying to cheer me up. You can't mean it. Of course I'm going to try to learn all I can, because you expect it; but I had rather stay — here. Even if it was as you say, I don't care anything about it, — only — only about — you!" She gasped, and hid her face against his shoulder.

A knock sounded on the door. The carriage had come.

"Well, my little girl, it is time to start."

The concentration of all yearning seemed focussed in Truth's soul. She could not speak. Van tightened his arms around her.

"Kiss me good-bye, Truth!"

Truth shivered. The room began to spin, and there were traces of fire in the whirl. She shut her eyes and lifted her face to his slowly, — very, very slowly. No martyr waiting for the sabre stroke could have felt more exquisite agony; yet the martyrdom was of bliss, not death.

As his lips met hers, she shivered again, then stood quite still.

He kissed her tenderly, compassionately, with a man's wonder and subtle vanity at her deep emotion.

She received it as a benediction, a consecration, a crown, a brand. Into its white fire she offered up her girlhood. In its hushed ecstasy and pride her dower of womanhood stood revealed.

CHAPTER XV

BAITED WITH A LIVE LORD

THAT evening Craighead sat alone in his library, for the airy apartment was cooler than his little stuffy office. His book lay open upon his knee, but his eyes seemed to pierce far through the carbon photograph of the Sistine Madonna that hung on his eastern wall. In fact his was a strange condition of vague excitement. He was annoyed at his inability to focus attention upon abstractions, though the visions of Truth that would insist on usurping the foreground of his thought were pleasant.

Poor child! She had really gone. The girlish face with its big earnest eyes would greet him no more, day by day, from the little restaurant table. If he were but living in his former Chestnut Street boarding-house he might understand it better, and that his marriage was, after all, a dream. But this French Renaissance gorgeousness had little congruity with confirmed bachelor instincts, and emphasized the loss of a dainty presiding genius. Things were really quite odd without her. There had been something sweet and sisterly in the bent, blond head by the window, poring over its cherished text-books far into the twilight, a homely cheer in the bright face that welcomed him on his return from business, a personal attachment knit into the tissue of mutual interests succeeding marriage.

And how she had clung to him at parting! She had stood very still under his farewell kiss. The smell of sunlit pine-trees was in her hair as he had leaned over her; her lips were soft and fragrant as a spring leaf. He

could feel them yet! Pshaw! She was but a child, more ignorant of life than any little Boston miss of twelve. She would be a glorious woman at twenty-five. But then he would be forty; too old for a hero, alas! It must go on as it had begun.

There is no man so self-centred but has at some time his little dream of wedded happiness. It was not thus that Craighead had forecast it, this mockery of marriage, this mere pleasant duty of domestic proximity. Neither had he desired, for alternative, a wild defiance of society's mandates, a Sicilian outlawry of romantic passion. Strange that his fate should be cast between two such abortive extremes! Orchid and Truth! Siren and sister! The evanescent mockery of the flame itself, and of its shadow! In either case he was foredoomed to the abnormal, the non-human, the barrenness of a desert from which he would emerge. But work,—that at least lay before him,—fame, power, wealth,—all but love. And how few men, after all, ever know but a mocking sip of life's best wine!

Such disturbing reveries were swallowed up, by the second night, in a complete reassertion of the lawyer's practical ambitions. Even a lone, lorn man is a mighty, self-consistent force, a bristling battleship of floating energies. Ever since Craighead's first glimpse of the dome at Washington, the roseate bubble of political preferment had hung vaguely against the gray spaces of his fancy. On his return from the South, a sobered and a married man, with the management of a vast estate opening vistas of new possibilities before him, the winged seed had rooted itself in the soil of a definite plan.

Later, the very success of his Simpson case had disgusted him with the cramp of those crooked alleys in which the mere corporation lawyer must writhe and turn. Truth's pure eyes, and her voice, as she pleaded, "But if you had known for *sure* that he was a bad man," would not leave him. His powers, his mental scope, his logical

habits, his personal keenness, his overmastering eloquence, all pointed to a nobler and more famous career.

He had always been an eager reader of cabled news, and a student of European politics. In his law-school days, he had been mighty in debates that dealt with world-issues. He deplored the ignorance of American legislators and diplomats. As treated here, the whole subject of international relations seemed to him devised for the sole purpose of establishing a few college professorships.

Yet law, once mastered, was less an ultimate definition than a tool for real men to wield. The stability of existing arrangements was an editorial illusion; the future a game that a few astute European statesmen were playing, with law for club-rules. We, too, had in Revolutionary days sent statesmen to Europe. But with our present motley array of pork and caucus packers, "world-imagination" might well be declared dead. He, Craighead, felt himself able to master the ignored conditions, to pierce to the possibilities, to marshal the persuasions, to compel the future. He would put his finger upon the weak places in the imagined balances of power, recast the theory of economic and of military expansions, anticipate the inevitable current of human greed, and gather up into single-handed thought the reins of racial destinies.

There was money in it, too. The leading world-issues have been, after all, and must ever remain, commercial. Our Pacific coast faced an awakening East. Hawaii, even now, was rising into prominence as a stepping-stone. Some of Van's Boston clients had already banded to invest large amounts in Japan, as soon as the new treaties should have come into operation. The exploitation of China's fabulous wealth claimed the ambition of rival syndicates. The very world-flows of cotton, oil, wheat, coal, and gold were changing, like the shifting of ocean currents over submerged coasts. Once North Africa had been the granary of the Roman Empire. The Manchesters and Pitts-

burgs of the future might well be planted along the banks of the Yangtse.

A week had passed. A cable from Liverpool assured the deserted husband that all was well with the travellers. In another week a letter from Truth arrived. Van threw down his volume of Captain Mahan's "Sea Power" to smile at the stiffly written address. He smiled again as he read the contents, dated from ship-board on the very day of landing.

"MY DEAR MR. CRAIGHEAD" [it began], — "I hope you will excuse me for not writing sooner. I have not been feeling very well. The ship is going a little slower now, though; and I am up on deck in a big chair with my writing-pad on my lap. It is very beautiful here. We can see pale blue lumps out on the edge of the water, and Mrs. Adams says they are hills on the coast of Ireland. I can't believe it. I keep always looking for countries the shape and color of those in my old geography at home. We are just passing a lighthouse. It looks like a big steel needle standing on end. Things smell different already. The captain says that we will get into Liverpool to-night. I hope that you are well, and that grandma will not get sick while I am away. Mrs. Adams tells me about all the glorious things we are going to see. I can hardly believe that I am going to see such glorious things. I will write you about everything. I was very sorry to leave you in Boston. If you need me, or grandma gets sick, please send me a telegram at once, and I will come right home, even without Mrs. Adams. She is very, very kind to me. But you have been kindest of all. I shall never forget it. Good-bye, dear Mr. Craighead. Please don't work too hard, and make yourself sick.

Ever sincerely, your loving wife,

TRUTH."

"What a school-girl!" laughed Craighead. "What a refreshing, innocent little letter! She expresses herself simply and directly; ease will come later. She is a dear

child. I shall tell her to go to the best photographer in Paris and be taken in several poses."

A few days earlier Craighead had received a dainty little note from Orchid, asking him to visit them at their charming summer place on Ponkatuck Island. He had been there for several days the previous summer. He knew well the fine yachting among the neighboring islands, the rich fishing, the comfortable castle, the delicious fare, and, better than all, the soft, luxurious languor of the climate, so in harmony with the personal moods of the Lady of Ponkatuck. The note, in spite of the inconceivable audacity of its request, had been something of a temptation, but one quickly overcome. Orchid doubtless knew of Truth's absence, and of Van's loneliness. If her long silence had been ominous of a secret campaign, this was, indeed, its opening gun. She had not written to him since his last court-room triumph. How narrowly Norton had saved him from peril that fateful night! He held the master hand over Orchid now, and meant to keep it. She could have real power to injure Truth only through his weakness.

Not long after receiving his wife's letter a second, more enticing, invitation arrived from the lady he had sworn to shun. "I have been fortunate enough to capture Lord Gayrock," she wrote, mentioning a famous Englishman then on a visit to the "States." "He has promised to give us several days. Knowing your admiration for his lordship, I can't bear to have him go without meeting you. Also I have ventured to tell him of the brilliant promise of your career. Of course he is English — painfully so — and knows everything; but one does not have the privilege of sitting on the hub of the British diplomatic wheel every day. Do come down Saturday afternoon, and stay over Sunday. Tom begs me to urge you in his name. My invitation would, of course, include Mrs. Craighead, but that I hear she is abroad. Please let

me know by wire if you are coming, so that I can arrange to have no outsiders present. You and Lord Gayrock will be quite enough for one small island."

Van realized in an instant that he should go. This would be an exceptional opportunity for keeping up a nominal friendship with the Wileys, and surely Orchid, with so distinguished a visitor to entertain, would find little chance of forcing *tête-à-têtes* upon Craighead. Besides, here was a man to meet! Lord G. had been a member of half the ministries that had governed the tight little island for the last twenty years. What arguments he, Craighead, could provoke! What policies extort from the rose-embowered lion! Orchid should see that he was not deteriorating, that his mental plasticity was not dependent upon her touch. He sent a message of assent forthwith.

Saturday came. The ride out over the Southern branch of the Old Colony Railroad was an interesting one. Within a few hours he had plunged into a new and softer climate. Massachusetts' beautiful southern bay with the ornithological name lay blue as a turquoise in the morning light, and was crusted at the edge with an almost unbroken line of villas, whose cool grays gleamed against it like a setting of antique silver. Land's end was reached at that queer dumping-ground called Wood's Holl, where a powerful steamer lay in wait for passengers to the island resorts of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. The sail out into the open sound refreshed Van's jaded senses. The scrub-covered coast of Cape Cod vanished in a forbidding, unbroken line to the east of Falmouth Harbor. Newport lay off somewhere in the blue films of distance along the southwest. Dozens of little yachts and schooners darted like butterflies across the greenish waters of the shallows. Far to the south could be descried an ocean liner whose passengers doubtless hailed with joy this first glimpse of home-land welcome as they beat their way up toward Fire Island. Van

was impressed anew by the sweet-scented moisture of the air. It distilled into the lungs like a rich, intoxicating balm. It was the spice of the South! He had inhaled it at Biloxi. Here the magic of the Gulf Stream became a tangible reality, its outlying currents playing lovingly about the roots of the Cape islands, ere it leaped in its bountiful mission across to the alien coasts of distant Ireland.

At Martha's Vineyard Van left the steamer, and found waiting for him at the antique, rotting wharf one of Tom Wiley's smaller yachts. The island of Ponkatuck lay but a mere speck to the southeast, in the very track of vessels bound for Boston and Portland.

Van was well acquainted with the bronzed skipper, a veritable sea-dog, whose memories smacked of ancient whale-oil and a loyal Nantucket pride in brick-built streets not yet overgrown with grass and mould.

"Well, Captain Whittaker! What luck this season?" Van had seated himself in the little cuddy, while the old sailor made the white-winged yacht skim like a gull.

"Waal! 'Bout th' same! They ain't any p'tick'ler changes, as I knows on. A sou'easter lay out new reef 'long from Pollock's. Ye c'n walk now harf 'mile where we used to troll for them bass. Land here's about 's onsartin as pollyticks."

Ponkatuck was hardly more than a rock with a sweep of open ground clinging to it on the north, a remnant, perhaps, of vast fields that the insatiate Atlantic had eaten away. The island was owned, entire, by Mr. Thomas C. Wiley, with the exception of a tiny corner reserved for the lighthouse service, and the life-saving station. Landing on a narrow strip of beach, Van made his ascent by a light zigzag wooden stairway to the brow of the chaotic in-beaten cliffs. The extraordinary beauty of the place impressed Craighead as if it were his first visit. The house, a veritable château, built out of rock as gray as that on which it stood, and not visible from the landing

beach, hung out over the sea behind a projecting buttress of taller cliffs, so that a view from the southwest windows, even to one leaning far over the sill, yielded but a blue-green sweep of ocean streaked with purple. By another guardian arm of granite it was sheltered from the worst fury of easterly storms.

The greater part of it was spread with an imbricate woof of Japanese ivy, thick and green in the middle, but spindling upward to pinkish tendrils that lay flat and close against the unmortared stone. On the landward side opened a garden and a tennis-court, through whose smoothed surfaces the original rock cropped up to spy jealously, and only a few scanty pines dared to obtrude. Off to the east, bounding a long rolling slope of coarse high grass where a herd of Jersey cattle found fairly congenial pasturage, stretched a dazzling line of white sand-dunes heaped against the sky like hasty breastworks of a foe sullenly retreating before the Atlantic's remorseless cannonade. But every portion of this channel island, this new-world Alderney, — cranny of cliff or slope of beach, garden space or rankish pasture, — was abloom with flowers, — with a flower that feared neither wind nor sand, nor rock nor scorching sunshine, — the glowing nasturtium. The old gray granite Druids were powerless beneath these riotous chaplets. The daring elves ventured over the very ramparts of the sea-wall, hanging in long loops of green and scarlet, like festoons of monkeys in tropic forests, and spouting taunts at the helpless waves. They heaped themselves in careless ambush along the borders of the lawn, whence they rushed to assault the ivied foundations of the intruding castle. The steps were fretted with them, the balconies half-sunken in their intoxicating bowers. Fierce their colors to the eye. Sunlight lay cool above them, — here fallen in great coins of copper, bronze, and gold, there tossed in flecks of burnished lacquer, — meteor-fountains of ruby, topaz, and chrysoprase from the treasure-laden earth, flint

sparks struck from the storm-hammered rocks, spray-borne memories of the phosphorescent sea! Gazing at them, Craighead recalled the fire-roses of the South.

Orchid stood on the gray steps, clad in a straight-hanging gown of nasturtium orange.

"Ah! you have come! Your boat was late!" She was as naïve and bright as a child.

"Yes! I'm here at last, unless I dream — a salamander's dream," he responded, smiling. She shook hands with him frankly, then led him up into the cool shade. "This is the castle of dreams," she said. "We intend to keep our guests under the spell of this spice wind. Boston must be a nightmare, these days!" She did not inquire about Truth.

Whittaker now arrived with Van's two heavy "grips," and the guest was shown to his room. He knew it well. It was one of those overhanging the ocean, where the low, continuous roar, filling his ears and lungs, flowed in his very blood. How different it was from the long, lazy, perfumed breathing of the Southern Gulf! There one listened to the sensuous, deliberate growth of sound, the whisper of a wave at languid play, the thin pushing up the sand, the long-drawn satisfied sigh as it spread its ripples out to the farthest voluptuous edge, then fell back exhausted among its fellows. Here its voice was the strident din of an invading army, the unbroken clatter of iron-shod feet over deserted pavements, backed with a muffled cannonade along a line of distant walls, and rising to the occasional explosion of a nearer bomb. How Truth would shrink from such a place as this! Orchid, he knew, worshipped it all in a sort of pagan ecstasy. "At times the sea has actually saved my reason," she once said to him. "What is the use of fretting, and tossing, and gnashing my teeth, when the ocean is doing it for me? I use it as the old Brahmin used his prayer-wheel."

Descending, Craighead found his hostess still upon the round, ivy-shaded veranda under the boldest tower of

the house. A large telescope mounted on a tripod was ready to sweep the horizon for passing steamers. Sometimes these came so close that Orchid could almost hail them. This, he knew, was her favorite nook. She was lying on an old East Indian wicker chair, — such as Tom's grandfather used to bring over in his patient barks to Timothy Pickering's Salem, — propped with cushions, and waving carelessly a huge round fan of plaited green and orange straw. On an Egyptian table of ancient hammered brass stood pitchers of iced drinks, crimson sangarees, yellow cobbler, and paler lemonade. A book was lying, face down, beside them. He read the title: Ibsen's "Lady from the Sea."

"You have found the coolest place," she smiled in welcome. "Now take that Chinese chair, a fan, a cobbler, and be happy!" There was no trace of coquetry in her tone or manner. She went on, "Tom and Lord Gayrock are still out fishing. I'm expecting them in every instant. I want to tell you about Lord G. He is really the most delightful man I have ever met." If this contained a covert challenge, Van ignored it. "Of course, as I wrote you, he would hardly be English did he not sometimes obtrude his insular proclivities. But he's genuinely interested in everything he sees; and I have aroused in him no small desire to meet so shining an ornament of the American bar." She waved her fan graciously toward Craighead, as she looked frankly into his eyes. He had never seen her less conscious of herself, or more companionable.

"If it were a mere question of success in a local corporation case, I should hardly presume to claim his attention," he answered, smiling. "But — perhaps you know — I've been plunging of late deeper into universal questions, studying seriously from a diplomatic standpoint those matters of world-interest we used to touch upon so lightly. My feeling that it was my professional duty to meet your distinguished guest satisfied the scruples of

duty, — as the privilege of conversing with his brilliant hostess gratified the claims of pleasure.”

He was bold thus to couple the past and the present, and to steer safely between unnecessary rudeness and fear of over gallantry. Orchid did not wince by so much as an eyelash. He was thankful for her tact. Suspicion was disarmed, and they chatted together like two rusticating children who have not happened to meet since the previous summer.

“Van, do you know, — I always felt that you were cut out for some great career. Why should you not stride, like the Secretary of State, from local practice to brilliant statesmanship? Lord Gayrock thinks the draft of that arbitration treaty, whether doomed to present success or failure, a most masterly precedent. Think, too, of his firmness at Chicago! We are fast drifting into times when we shall feel the need of wills like yours, solid as that lighthouse over on the cliff.”

“Have you talked with his Lordship about this threatening silver-craze?”

“No. I leave finance to Tom. Of course the President is beside himself with worry. We are all going over to McKinley, willy-nilly. But, oh, if McKinley had but one tithe of your adamantine persistence!”

And so they talked, while the round shadows of nas-turtium leaves crept eastward across the marble floor, and blue afternoon mists, like drowsy thought made visible, floated in from the bar of the horizon. Her words were full of interest, enthusiasm, encouragement. Evidently her mind was alert with all the English statesman had been telling her. She vibrated with intuitive appreciation of Van's new-fledged ambitions. Some of her observations fairly startled Van by their acuteness. Here was Orchid at her best, keen, brilliant, intellectual, sympathetic, impersonal. The languorous and seductive Orchid, the piqued and jealous Orchid, he looked for in vain. Could she ever have existed? Oh, that Orchid

might have remained always thus! He sighed involuntarily for the old companionship, the quick repartee, the sparkling wit, the marvellous intuition, the sound judgment in all matters save those that touched her personal vanity, the unaffected interest in his own career. He was conscious of a vague wish that gossip and marriage were alike drowned in the outer sea, and that the fatal interview preceding his Southern trip had never been forced.

"Sometimes I cannot help wishing I were a man," Orchid cried with flashing eyes. "Such aims and opportunities as yours make life real! If I were you, Van, I would fill Music Hall with a swaying, shouting mass of maddened followers, pliant to my purpose. If I were a man, I would seize, — as I now can but see — the very heart of the web of intrigue. History should be my food, law my armor, but knowledge of men my sword! *Nothing* should stand against me! I would hold the world in my hand, — a tinted ball! Oh, to be a man!"

"Women have done as much," he said slowly.

"Yes! And how?" she flashed back. "Like a Punch and Judy show, with men for rag-babies! The more pliable the babies, the funnier their antics! The more one succeeds, the greater the contempt for one's means of success. And who would wish to wreck things, like Cleopatra, for her own silly pleasure? Women are always doing that! — No; no! —" she sat upright, her face electric, — "women's weapons are weakness; men's weakness and their own. I adore strength! It's the grandeur of the cause I would lead, the imminence of the world-issue, that stings my veins!"

"You have not always been so altruistic in your emotions," he said quickly, and the next moment could have bitten his tongue for saying it.

"That's what I tell you is a curse of sex," she replied coolly. "Perhaps in the case of a few it is not irremediable."

"Would you have cared to be Jeanne d'Arc?" he asked, by way of a hasty retreat.

There was a pause. "Yes, because of her power. But I should not have wasted it all on that fool of a king!"

"What would you have done?"

"Heaven knows! Think of the opportunities! I might have killed the king and his sneaking courtiers, and set up a man, — myself, had I been one! Then I would have sent a trusty general to sham treason with the English, and lead them into a deadly ambush!"

"You would reverse history," he said, smiling at her excitement.

"Of course I would! What man worth calling a leader who does n't! Did n't Napoleon? If Bryan is a real man, and not a wind-bag, he will ride his tatterdemalion legions into the White House, and there dictate terms to them. Just as it is the joy of an artist to carve ideas out of a given fact, — a castle out of sea-worn rocks, if you will — so it is the privilege of a statesman to coin the very despairs of his age into success. The present is a streaky piece of marble enough, but a genius should spell out his key to the future in its every vein. — Ah, I hear Tom and Lord Gayrock coming up the ladder!"

She rose and leaned far over the railing to watch their approach. "What a string of fish! Bravo, my lord! I see you are a fisher, not of men only. I began to fear that you would be too late for dinner, but now you have brought it with you. My lord, this is Mr. Craighead, the young Boston advocate who is so deeply interested in British politics."

Van greeted the foreign dignitary with cool self-possession. Dignity had not saved the great man's nose from a blister, nor his aristocratic person from the homely smell of fish.

"Go away, — both of you!" cried Orchid, gayly. "This is n't a fish market! You are positively disreputable!" But she went up to his lordship with a look that more

than cancelled her bright inhospitality, and flattered about him with questions concerning his "spin," and his fatigue, until Van, quite neglected, turned away to the sea.

Lord Gayrock's face had its full share of that British heaviness, that hereditary doom of self-satisfaction and fat, which Americans have come to associate with the more famous among their English cousins. Van felt that his only possible outlook upon the universe was through the high gold rim of his own eyeglasses. "Small chance for argument there!" thought the younger man; and he was right. Lord Gayrock did not argue. He listened ponderously, pityingly, to cruder views; then, out of the largeness of his nature, diffused adjustments. As soon might an unbidden guest sneak into the Queen's drawing-room through a back window, as an idea impart itself to Lord G.'s intelligence until labelled "made in England." He might be a man, — that exit led to the kitchen. He might be a philanthropist, — that was the door to his private chapel. But his brain had only a single wicket, — he would have called it a triumphal arch — and the Lion and the Unicorn were its door-posts.

The dinner, that evening, was informal. Craighead sat on Orchid's left, Lord Gayrock at her right; but the smiles of the hostess were reserved almost exclusively for the Englishman. "Now she's trying to pique me," thought Van, with satisfaction.

Orchid seemed to hang upon his lordship's every word, drinking in thankfully at that fountain of wisdom. "Any fool could tell her those things!" thought Van, angrily. "They appear in the London papers as regularly as advertisements. She must be feigning interest!"

As dinner progressed, Craighead's self-satisfaction vanished. His hostess's interest in Lord G. was apparently genuine, and indisputably absorbing. The large-faced Englishman received this homage as no more than his due. His manner was condescendingly affable, and, to one onlooker at least, excessively irritating.

Conversation soon practically narrowed down to dialogues between the vivacious Orchid and her magnanimous visitor. Tom, at the head of the table, had nailed the good-humored smile of a host across his ruddy countenance, and behind that placard had quietly gone off fishing. The Boston lawyer sat with his eyes riveted on his plate, like a sulky school-boy.

Most disquieting of all were Orchid's occasional apologetic efforts to draw Van within the charmed circle. With a start she would seem to recall herself, and desire to make restitution to the slighted guest. This was almost more than he could endure. Graciously pliant to his hostess's will, Lord G. would peer downward an instant at Van, murmuring a thickly accented "Aw — yes! — Mr. aw — Craghead — as I was saying to — aw — Meeses Wilaw —" etc., etc., until at times the younger guest had to clench his fists beneath the table in order to prevent himself from committing murder. He could not trust himself to return the glance, and his answers grew so curt that Lord G. at last forsook Orchid and a pineapple-ice at the same time, that he might put up a gleaming monocle to wither the insurgent.

"Aw — I perceive our young friend across table is nawt — interested in — aw — international policy. Shall we change the topic, me dear Mrs. Wilaw, to — aw — sport?"

Orchid's smothered giggle was like salt to a new wound. Tom looked more like a cow than ever.

"I'll tell you what Mr. Craighead is vitally interested in," said Orchid, hurriedly. "The problem of reconstruction between North and South. After the war, you know, our radical leaders iniquitously gave the slaves that pocket-weapon of assassination, the ballot. At last we recognize our mistake. We have murdered the aristocracy of the land. It would be quite like bringing in wild Irishmen to settle on your own landed estates, my lord."

"How — aw — extra-ordinarily interesting!" remarked

his lordship, swivelling his double-barrelled eyesight again on Van's sullen defences. "And is — aw — Mr. Craighead devising a plahn for — aw — disfranchising the blacks?"

Orchid drew a long sigh. "Ah, my lord! We all see now that England was right in her view of our little brotherly quarrel. The true British chivalry and culture of the Stuart cavaliers became concentrated in the life of our Southern plantations. In growing cotton for your world-famed manufactures a congenial and normal alliance was maintained with the mother-country. Alas! our canting, money-grubbing Puritans overturned all that. But to-day we are retrieving the error by ourselves renewing that broken alliance of wealth with aristocratic culture. It is only by the intermarriage of our most typical families that the problem can be solved. Now, Mr. Craighead represents one of the oldest manufacturing dynasties of Massachusetts, and he has recently executed a treaty of marriage with a charmingly refined granddaughter of the most lordly of Alabama's ante-bellum estates."

Orchid expanded her slim chest with oratorical effusion as she uttered these bombastic sentences.

Lord Gayrock gave her a doubtful glance, but remarked, with well-bred interest, "Quite extraordinary, don't you know! Alabama! Let me see. Yes, I remember! There was a battleship of that name. We believed in the courage of your wife's splendid race, Mr. Craighead. It is now far too late to dwell upon the moral issues involved in that unfortunate misunderstanding, but, whatever her principles, the South gave us a wonderful illustration of chivalrous loyalty. We of England have been accused of partisanship. Certainly it is true that even now we rejoice to see, with the administration of your great democratic President, the South being re-invested with some of the power which is her due. And is it, if I may ask, part of your plan to reorganize that Southern labor which your unscrupulous demagogues so ruthlessly destroyed?"

The blood had surged into Craighead's face and back to his heart more than once as he listened, silently, to this oration. The words and the obtuseness of the Englishman did not anger him; it was that small, triumphant, mocking smile on Orchid's red lips, the bovine alarm that spread to her husband. Was this, then, her motive in securing Lord Gayrock's presence, and then tricking him, Craighead, into coming? Revenge, subtle taunts, a hugging of herself in the after-thought,—of all these she was capable. Now let him break a lance with his lordship, or be what Orchid was trying to prove him—a fool!

The young man's hands were steady, his eyes level and calm, as he lifted his face from his plate to meet Lord Gayrock's gaze. Only one swift glance, flashed toward Orchid, was like the metaphorical blow from an antagonist's glove.

"My lord," he said gently, "allow me to correct the impression that Mrs. Wiley has unwittingly given. It is true that I am married to a young Southern lady, a daughter of the old aristocracy. She is at present, to her own advantage and my personal loss, a sojourner in your lordship's charming country. Her native state is Alabama, and you are quite correct in your supposition that there was a battleship of that name. Perhaps you can also recall what England had to pay for her erroneous sympathy with that ship and her cause. The partisanship of England, at that time of bitter struggle, arose, I am inclined to think, more from the personal interest of her manufacturers than from higher and more intelligent motives. Surely England's educated classes could not have wished to uphold an antiquated, rotten state of semi-civilization which they themselves discarded in 1688. Perhaps, too, your countrymen somewhat underrated the strength of our Northern yeomanry, men of that very vigor and mettle in which your lordship's own ministry is so safely rooted. It is impossible, under certain atmos-

pheric conditions, to gain proper perspective across the water. Vision is deflected, you know, and an eye fixed upon — say — Alabama, might easily be shattered against a cotton-mill in Massachusetts.

Lord Gayrock cocked one bushy eyebrow into a humorous interrogation. He looked at the young man with more interest than he had yet shown.

"It may be so," he said gravely, "but now that I am bodily in A-may-ricka, my eye, when fixed upon a negro, can scarcely rest upon a white man. The negro problem is the real one for your South."

"Ah, that unfortunate race!" cried Van, the studied coldness of his manner deserting him all at once. "We cannot transport and exterminate these innocent people. For their sakes and our own, we must educate them, taking the chances of danger in the process. The sin of their enforced ignorance shall be visited upon our children's children."

"This interest in posterity is new," said Orchid with an unpleasant laugh.

Craighead flushed in spite of himself, and the sentence at the tip of his tongue faltered. Orchid saw her opportunity.

"Let me explain!" she broke in. "Mr. Craighead's theories do him credit, but, alas! I fear that they can never be more than theories. He is wedded to a concrete opposition. We could have no such revolutionary discussions were Mrs. Craighead present. Fancy her horror at the very thought of a cultured black. I confess to some sympathy with her point of view. Think what may come of it! Thrifty negroes buying up the soil of the South, and employing grandchildren of their former masters to till it! Mon Dieu! We might as well annex Hayti at once!"

"Or Hawaii," put in his lordship, shrewdly.

Orchid glanced at the great man with dancing eyes. "Ah, my lord, you see everything! You will digest our

American types like so many truffles. What a pity that you are not to meet Mrs. Craighead! With her aristocratic Southern manners and untutored ways she brings a new element into Boston's jaded atmosphere."

"That's true, — every word of it!" cried honest Tom. "Mrs. Craighead is one of the sweetest, frankest, most charming brides that Boston has seen for many a day. All our club fellows think Van the deuce of a lucky chap!"

At this, conversation seemed stricken with sudden paralysis. Orchid gave an impatient gesture of dismissal; the dinner broke up, and Van pleaded headache as an excuse to withdraw from the smoking-room, whither, as the evening air was a trifle chill for the veranda, Orchid had accompanied the gentlemen for an innocent Egyptian cigarette.

He made for the beach, but loneliness did not soothe. Returning to the balcony, boisterous laughter greeted him from the window. He glanced within, and saw that Tom had vanished. It was a close *tête-à-tête*. Orchid's voice rose in the ascendant, forcing something upon his lordship in a tone of outrageously effusive flattery. Had she heard him, Craighead, approach? With a sneer of disgust he turned on his heel, and hurried to his bedroom through the dimly lighted hall. There he lay awake for hours, coolly weighing Orchid's probable motives, and rehearsing his campaign of procedure for the following day.

"Wonderful creature!" he thought with increasing equanimity. "She is only trying to goad me into action. She wants to see a good round fight. I'll empty the reservoir of her malice before this time to-morrow, — or know the reason why! Thunder! What a diplomat's wife that woman would have made!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE PASSING OF THE ANGLO-SAXON

NEXT morning Craighead ran down the ladder for a plunge, so early that a level shaft from the half-risen sun was shattered against a lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard, otherwise invisible in the lilac haze. A soft, languid breeze rendered the moisture-laden air of night an exquisite caress, like the breath of a child just waking in its downy crib. The little harbor was deserted. Even Whittaker had not come yet to examine the lobster traps; all manner of creeping and sliding things glistened in the meshes of seaweed that were tossed at intervals upon the beach. The yachts lay tranquilly at their moorings, like sea-birds asleep with heads tucked under their loosened wings; only the long swells beneath their keels made them breathe with a slight nod and sigh, as though they dreamed of delirious poises on foam-beaten wave crests.

With his first headlong dive, the green bubbles stung him. The effervescence was like that of uncorked champagne. He felt at one with the rhythmic fluids of all elemental creatures, and suddenly that strange, unreasoning joy in life which must come, however rarely, to all healthy, normal human beings, took possession of him. Age was nothing, — nor time, nor space! The frets and stings of last night were of less account than the torn bits of sea-fern, that lay flaccid for an instant on his bare chest, only to drift away at the next breath.

After the swim, his new energy spurred him to a walk inland, a scramble over crags, and a race, in ten-league

strides, down the farther slopes of the cool sand-dunes, until he found himself again beside the water. With a boyish instinct, he stooped to pick up the wet pebbles that the sea kept tossing at his feet. Where were the reefs of amethyst and porphyry from whose crown these brilliants had been torn? He could not guess; but their jealous tints, alive under the glaze of their native medium, faded in his hands to common chalk. He threw them aside, and walked, whistling, to the very point of the eastern bar, where he stood looking out upon a tide which ran as dark as blue ink.

How hot it was as he made his way back through the tall grass! The bees were out in force, shooting zigzags of humming vibration across the mild air, or, like rival miners, sinking eager shafts into placers of nasturtium gold.

The massive, ivied veranda of the house, this August morning, was grateful to his senses as the cool aisle of a cathedral. A slight dizziness blurred his vision as he threw himself into a long straw chair and watched the pale Atlantic horizon tremble against blue ether like the far wing of some great, sleepy bird. He rang for coffee and a roll, and learned from servants that the other inmates had breakfasted in their several apartments. One by one they strolled down, as the irresponsible inclination of each listed, until Orchid, in a soft pink morning-gown, completed the circle with her chastened "good-morning," and placed in Lord Gayrock's hand an English edition of his national Book of Common Prayer. Accepted and read as his right, there was no trace of religious mockery in the responses of the mixed congregation; rather did the patient impassiveness of Tom, the pious eagerness of the hostess, and the nature-communing mood of the young lawyer blend in a strain as natural as the ocean with the slow, ponderous intoning of his lordship's reverent voice, that now called down the blessing of Him who kindled the sun in a day, and shall fold up the sea

as a scroll, upon the gracious sovereign, Queen Victoria, and all them that are intrusted with her authority. Each one present felt a strange sense of community with the millions of proud, pious hearts breathing that day the same loyal homage in every quarter of the two whirling hemispheres, on every dot of rock or speck of ship in those globular wastes, where Anglo-Saxon restlessness can find a perch for its winged feet.

A light luncheon followed, and after the luncheon came a proposition for an afternoon spin in the big steam-yacht "Burlington," a private extension of Tom's colossal trans-Pacific route from Shanghai to Boston.

"Would n't it be better for you, Tom, and Lord Gayrock to take 'The Orchid' and go out beyond Cresset Rock for bluefish?" queried the namesake of that graceful little vessel. "Perhaps Mr. Craighead is tired with his morning's ramble, and might prefer a nap."

"Oh, no, indeed!" said Van, with alacrity, "I'm as lively as a school-boy on May-day. The sail will be the very thing for all of us, and I'm sure you can't deprive Lord Gayrock of your charming companionship, Mrs. Wiley."

Van and Orchid looked into each other's eyes; but the batteries were masked.

The sail was, indeed, a thing of joy, — boat, people, sky, and ocean rocking as one against the heart of that sweet-tempered afternoon. Under the unscalable banks of the deserted Cape they lurked, now making way into little scrub-fringed creeks that are bordered in spring with the silver stars of the arbutus, and overgrown now with whortleberry and the scented bay, — creeks that led to silent inland lagoons, and farther, by fresh-water rills to chains of lakes where low, gnarled oaks fished with copper fingers for big-leaved lilies, large and golden-hearted as the Oriental lotos. All these things Orchid described to his lordship as they drifted in among sand-banks where the first signs of human life are junks hauled up off Oster-

ville like drying herrings, and out again by long, low necks, and headlands lifting sleepily, as of indifferent sea-serpents swimming off lazily toward the focus of Monomoy Point light. Black iron craft from Philadelphia, laden with coal for Boston, felt cautious footing among submerged shoals; then suddenly swung around joyously into the determined blue of a deeper sea that swept them, dipping and careening, up toward Provincetown.

Now swinging into the teeth of a rising wind, the "Burlington" cut angles of flying foam from the rushing tide that has severed Ponkatuck from Nantucket's western cape, and so up past Cresset Rock where gulls were weaving invisible webs from crag to crag, and around by the one little roadstead of Pollock's Bar, just in time to accept a silent benediction from the sun, now sinking somewhere behind Point Judith.

As Van dressed for dinner, he congratulated himself upon his tact and reserve during the day. He had frankly enjoyed himself, as all had done. There had been no recurrence to serious topics, and Orchid had neither courted nor neglected him. He knew that the real test of the visit, were one to be, must come during the approaching dinner.

And, indeed, it was a dinner that night which added fresh laurels to Orchid's long series of social and culinary triumphs. The room was hung throughout in white and pale green. The china, Bellek ware, so far as it could be obtained, was supplemented by thin white Haviland, strewn with tiny branches of maiden-hair fern. The silver was enamelled in white and emerald. In the centre of the table lay a long, flat, sparkling glass dish, the borders half hidden under a wreath of maiden-hair fern and white orchids. Above it hung a great pointed censer, or net, of crystal and silver, filled loosely with masses of ice, from which the water dripped tinkling into the shallow bowl, and radiated small refreshing sprays to the nodding flowers. The candelabra, standing stiff and tall at each corner of the table, and hanging

everywhere in sconces on the wall, gleamed in surfaces of solid or carved silver; but the massed tapers were stained the color of freshly powdered Japanese tea. Orchid was herself arrayed in white, silver, and green, a single enormous emerald, set on a narrow fillet of silver, burning above her brow.

Van, exhilarated by the day's experience, the wine of blue distilled air, felt as restless as a pawing racer held in leash. His lordship settled down to the business of eating with the ponderous purr of a pampered lion, well worth watching in spite of his apparent sleepiness. Orchid was ready, as an alert fly, to lead, goad, or bewilder, as the combatants might need.

Much to the surprise of all, it was Tom that opened the ball.

"You Canadian Pacifics will have to join us in that Southeastern connection through Kansas City, mullord. We'll have the West Indies before five years,—see if we don't!—and then you can issue through bills from Havana to Hong Kong."

Lord Gayrock, immersed in his soup, took a new, deliberate spoonful, before replying, in a tone that settled things:—

"We'll wait for the Nicaragua Canal!"

Orchid began to sparkle with anticipation. "What delight," she cried, "to hear you diplomats talk as if all the world were one! In your presence, my lord, we feel the live blood flowing between England and America. Don't we, Mr. Craighead?"

There was a pause.

"You talk as if Great Britain were going to make and hold the Nicaragua Canal, Lord Gayrock!" blurted out Van at last. "I thought it was planned for the convenience of the United States navy."

Lord Gayrock looked up slowly and pityingly. No doubt he had heard of the United States navy, and was genuinely sorry for it.

"Pardon me," he began in the tone in which one soothes a child; "but I fear that I see in you, Mr. Craighead, just that unfriendliness toward us that is withdrawing our interest — and our capital — from your clever enterprises."

"There is still much left," said Van.

"But expansion, commercial expansion!" insisted his lordship. "Commerce must grow, and you wish no rivalry or participation. Even your large-minded President was — aw — unsympathetic — about Venezuela!"

"Venezuela!" echoed Van, with a flashing look that was more hostile than he realized.

Lord Gayrock reddened slightly. "Yes. All we required, or require, is fair play and friendly feeling."

"We have tried those more than once, and what has been the reward? I answer, rudely perhaps, — *intrigue!* Why, my lord, you are bidding for Central America now, flirting with Hawaii, exchanging notes with Spain, — and hugging Alaska closer!"

The British lion was just teased enough to growl.

"And do you consider America free from taint of political intrigue? The pity of your American sentimentalists over the sorrows of Cuba and the wrongs of Liliuokalani, points, I greatly suspect, to an attempt at dismembering Spain's ancient colonies. Spain is a European, our sister! Shall the European concert remain indifferent while you attempt to block the highways of the world? A congress of nations shall guarantee the freedom of your Southern waters."

He shook himself like a great Newfoundland dog. It was Van's turn to color.

"Hear! hear!" cried Orchid, merrily. "You both are right, only you are looking through different sides of the same pane of glass. You each see the other, and mistake it for his own reflection in a mirror. After all, we are one. Why don't you recognize it, and have all this international wrangling over? Then you can calmly

sit down on one bench, like good children with a plum tart, and divide it between you."

Van smiled and nodded in her direction ; Lord Gayrock looked puzzled. "A — plum — tart !" he repeated, doubtfully. "Ah, I see ! very good, — very good !"

"Then," she cried brightly, as she lifted her glass of Tokay, "the question is settled, and I drink to the coming Anglo-Saxon alliance."

"Not so fast," laughed Craighead. He had no intention of shaking paws with the lion, so long as there was a convenient tail to twist.

"Give us a chance first to try our new policy of expansion. We are better off alone. We are outgrowing one-sided arbitration in our own way. McKinley means Hawaii, — yes, and Cuba, too. Why should we bind ourselves to the rescuing of British chestnuts, — scraping together a hasty army for the coralling of Boers, lassoing of Soudanese, and smoking out of hill-tribes ? We have no fleet yet to send to Suez and the Dardanelles, — no bombs for insurrectionary Cretans."

Orchid's eyes shone. This seemed like old times. She turned to Lord Gayrock, who was paying attention to nothing but a plateful of jellied turkey.

"What do you say to that, my lord ? Shall we lend you a few smart Yankee ships to help out your Mediterranean fleet ?"

His lordship swallowed his third chin. Van did not wait.

"Yes, look to your fleets, my lord ! You talk of the European Concert as if it were a sub-committee with an Englishman in the chair. To the outside world it may look different. England has so many hen-roosts to watch that she can't see where the fox really creeps. You are isolated. It is no longer for you a problem of expansion, but of a defensive struggle. England has now to fight for her life !"

Lord Gayrock gave an incredulous start. "Fight, Mr.

Craighead! Fight! Why, the peace of Europe has never been more fully assured. The balance of power was never more complete!"

Van tossed off a glass of champagne, then settled down to steady work, like a yacht whose every stitch strains conscious to the buoyant wind.

"European kings," he began sententiously, "used to play at war according to brotherly rules. After Napoleon demolished their lead soldiers, England floated for them a Noah's Ark labelled 'Balance of Power.' But now, since with the weakness of Italy and Austria the 'Triple Alliance' that walled apart Russia and France, — England's mortal foes, — has crumbled, these malcontents, who have been waiting ever since Tilsit, are rushing together like two hungry gases. With their definite alliance opens the campaign of the next century. I should say that the Balance of Power had sprung several bad leaks, and was in great danger of sinking."

Lord Gayrock smiled a withering smile, as if he were dealing with a small boy who had failed in his Catechism.

"We have been on the point of collapsing, I believe, ever since Philip despatched the Armada!"

Van colored.

"I answer you with one black word, Lord Gayrock, — 'Armenia!' To-day, should Crete explode your powder-magazine, Salisbury dare not lift a finger! Remember, I prophesy that!"

He turned away with irritating confidence.

Orchid laughed. "But Germany, Van! Are n't you forgetting little William?"

"No!" he answered sharply, without looking up. "Germany's caught in a vice. 'Little William' pretends that he is the tail that wags the dog. But who barks? Her merchants are jealous of England, too. She is bound to have colonies, — markets. Think of the insult to England of William's message to the Boers! Think of his despicable playing of Russia's game after the China-Japan

war! No, I tell you, he has been forced to throw in his lot with the Bear and the Frog!"

"It *was* mean of them to force those plucky little Japs to disgorge Liautung," said Orchid with spirit. "My lord, I cannot understand why England did not seize that wonderful, golden opportunity to support Japan, and make her own policy dominant at Peking."

Van started, and gave the speaker a sudden, surprised smile. "It was a crime!" he cried, as if in spite of himself.

Lord Gayrock looked up coldly.

"And was England to trust that ambitious, cruel, half-civilized little race? As for Germany, we shall see! Perhaps the English navy is strong enough to take care of itself, east or west, no matter what Germany or Japan may do."

"But that is admitting what I said," retorted Van. "You see that you are isolated."

"If one can be said to be isolated with two such henchmen as Canada and Australia, I presume we are isolated," said Lord Gayrock, indifferently. He seemed to be wearying of the debate, and turned for relief to the bright eyes of his hostess.

But Orchid was alive to the finger-tips with the questions at issue.

"Yes, you have Canada and Australia," she said earnestly, "and you have what is even more, — the respect of the world. I cannot believe that you will lose it. Only — do not underestimate the value of friendship. Suspicion is a heavy armor."

Lord Gayrock looked into her eager face with a smile that was very genuine and sweet.

"If there were more American women like you, Mrs. Wiley, — friendship would be demanded on other grounds than policy. Your keen intuitions more than cancel the perverse blindness of your young men. The flower of American civilization is woman, — and of the sex you

are, —" here he lifted her hand to his lips with a courtly, old-world gesture, — "'Queen-Rose of the garden.'"

"Oh, Lord Gayrock, you *shouldn't*," Orchid simpered, hanging her jewelled head with an affectation of shyness. A blush, exasperating to Van, suffused her forehead. Tom looked both flattered and alarmed. Orchid sent one glance upward toward Van's cold eyes, and then, dropping her head again, began to fidget nervously with her rings.

Who threw the challenge? Whose glove was it? Van did not know or care. He put down his glass with a bang, and had to restrain himself from rising, as if to address the bench at a critical moment. The heat of his resolve might have melted the frozen sweets just set before him. These were cast in the form of green and pink lotos-flowers. He was not conscious of noticing them. His head was on fire with ideas that shot clear and tapering as rockets. He hurled them full in the breast of his vis-à-vis.

"I congratulate you on your taste, my lord!" His voice rose till the sentence burst at the tip. "Mrs. Wiley is the most wonderful woman in the world —"

"Except Mrs. Craighead, of course!" giggled Tom.

Van failed to hear Mr. Wiley's innocent remark, and continued without a quaver: —

"Her soul is a search-light projected on the misty future. It is you English who are blind. She sees to the core of the problem of the Liautung Peninsula."

Lord Gayrock's face was stony, as if he repelled with indifference the shafts of a mad archer. Orchid was like a film growing incandescent at the meeting of two polar wires. No one interrupted Mr. Craighead, who gulped down another glass of champagne, and continued: —

"It is a question of colonies and commercial expansion, God knows, — what else does any one fight for? The British navy may be the greatest fact in existence, but what of that if obtuseness reigns at the Admiralty.

Yet, even now this obtuseness is not fatal. The attitude of the Kaiser is not decisive. The future is yet open, and England has a year or two in which to snatch it, — and that, too, in the face of a hostile world."

Utter silence followed this announcement. Van paused deliberately. He felt that he had caught his audience and could afford to hasten slowly.

"But," he said, in the confident tone of one who has recently acquired his facts, "there is a flaw, — a flaw in the British perception of things. And that is why her glory is about to pass. Like Hannibal tottering on the verge of world-dominion, England fails to recognize the imminence of her supreme opportunity. The golden, pivotal moment, plastic to the touch of a dozen master-fates, will pass, — will pass unseized. The Lords will hesitate, Salisbury will cough and go to his club. London will sleep calmly that night. But incompetence will have burned Fate's seal into her world! A year later Britain will wake up. You will tear your hair. You will curse your present leaders, your betrayers. You will fight and die, like men, — but — the world will belong to another!"

Lord Gayrock's face remained perfectly grave. He kept his eyes upon the bunch of pale green grapes from which he was eating, yet somehow no one doubted that he listened, and listened attentively. The emotions stirring under the dome of his heavy forehead were not easy to conjecture. Perhaps at this moment the English lack of humor was something to be thankful for.

As for Orchid, she felt just a twinge of social apprehension. Now that Van was aroused, she knew not to what lengths he might go. Already he had used more than one brusque sentence. She wished to hold herself aloof from his eloquence, to check, to direct, to combine; but she was fast becoming powerless to resist the tide he was arousing in her soul. These were the questions they two alone had discussed so many, many times before.

She did not see the bombast, or the youthfulness; she only heard the timbre of a masterful voice, and felt the magnetism of flashing eloquence. Her hand lay on the table, palm upward, involuntarily stretched toward him. She leaned farther to the left than she knew, waiting with quivering nostrils for a clew that began to fire the whole east for her as a dawn.

Van felt himself inspired. Yet he was conscious of an attempt to marshal his facts coolly, like a general whose brain clears as the powder-smoke thickens.

“Europe is like the Hoang Ho, that bursts its banks, floods provinces, and changes its course. As Rome sought food in Mauritania, and the Gothic Teutons in Rome, so do our nations scour the world to-day for colonies. A torrent of French, Germans, Russians, and British eddies and brawls over Africa, Asia, and Micronesia. The old domestic balance of power has burst. At present chaos reigns. Toward what new lines of outer equilibrium shall the tangled currents finally seeth and set? Where shall the new meridians be drawn? That is the supreme problem for living brains.”

He leaned back for breath. This time Lord Gayrock looked up. Orchid's eyes were fixed upon Craighead: Tom stared out into vacancy with a sort of troubled, dull excitement. No one thought of him,—the honored guest.

The old statesman sighed. He did not resent the momentary neglect, but he sighed for the youth, the uncalculating enthusiasms, the new wine of thought in the old bottles of convention, which could never be his again. Craighead was talking to himself and Orchid, not to outsiders,—this the Englishman had known all along. The ardor was that of self-assertion, of definite statement,—not of polemics. Neither of these young people cared what he thought, and yet he was so much wiser, so much more experienced! The day was not far ahead when Craighead would flush at the recollection of this sopho-

more outburst. This, too, Lord Gayrock knew. But, even so, to have a woman's eyes fixed on one with such a look — !

"You have thought deeply," said he, turning to Craighead. "I should be glad to hear your opinion of the problem."

Craighead was flattered, but a little distrustful. He scanned his questioner's face for a sneer that did not exist.

"Yes, yes, Van!" Orchid broke in impetuously. "Tell us how it seems to you. What is the way out?"

"Well," began Craighead, with less vehemence, "from my point of view Constantinople is a dead issue, and the Mediterranean too small an artery for the commercial heart of the world. The fibres of empires are wheat and cloth and iron and coal and massed labor. In less than a century these have produced Chicago and New York. In less than another the Manchesters and Pittsburgs of the world will be on the Yangtse River. It is for this that England should preempt, or, at least, protect those matchless sites. And in doing so her one available ally is Japan. This small empire holds the future in her hand, as a child may hold a seed, and she alone can plant it. It may be an easy matter to knock down the child, and take the seed, but then, where will be the harvest?"

"I see what you mean," said Orchid. "We have talked so often — Oh, Lord Gayrock," she cried, remembering herself and her guest all at once, "don't *you* see, too? It is not only commerce that is at stake, but culture. Think of a united world, East and West, each giving its heart to the other! Already we are tinged with the art, the poetry, the philosophy of the Orient, and she with our more practical ambitions. It must come now, — soon, — before I am an old woman! So, sir, you just go back to London and send the Mikado a cable, putting your whole Asiatic squadron at his disposal. Then indeed will I drink to the Anglo-Saxon alliance!"

She lifted her glass and held it out in a straight line toward the statesman. Her face was more intoxicating than the wine. Then she turned to Van. His eyes were gray diamonds, and his mouth eloquent, though the lips were shut. She caught her breath, faltered an instant, and then set down her glass with an unsteady hand.

Lord Gayrock saw it all.

"This is most interesting, my dear Mrs. Wiley," he said in tones that were a little cold, "but I fear it may be a trifle impracticable, er — visionary — if you will. Political speculation, especially when indulged in by your charming sex, has a tendency to be — aw — visionary; and I have known many ladies to excite themselves needlessly over things which, in their very nature, cannot take place. Now in this matter of Japan the inherent nature of the race renders them impossible as permanent allies. Our own colonists in Yokohama and Kobe give the worst account of them. Moreover, we are diplomatically the friend of China, and how can we be expected to go over to her bitterest enemy? I fear that you as highly overrate Japan, Mrs. Wiley, as does your young friend the gravity of the crisis."

"No," said Orchid, earnestly, "I feel that you are mistaken in both assumptions. I have a cousin, a practical business man, who has just returned from an Eastern tour of investigation. He was indignant at the attitude of the average English merchant in the open ports of Japan. He says that they are piqued because they cannot cuff and bully the Japanese as they can the East Indians, or the Ceylonese, or any of those effete races. No, the Japanese are not rag-babies, they are *men*!"

"Even so," replied his lordship, concessively, "they are not the only men. There are, for instance, the Russians. Japan has more to fear from them than we."

"And I suppose you would let brave, plucky Japan be crushed by the Russians before you would lift a finger!"

"Ah, then, it is merely a question of protecting the

dear little Japs!" remarked the great man with voice and eyeglass elevated.

But Craighead broke in:—

"It is a question of protecting *yourself*, my lord, and against these very Russians. Do you think that Russia forced Japan's renunciation with no ulterior motive? She intends Port Arthur for her own, for the terminus of her trans-Siberian railway. A thousand Russian soldiers a month are passing Suez. Manchuria will be cut off. The pitiable weakness of China is now, for the first time, exposed. Russia, backed by Germany and France, has but to demand the whole peninsula, and it will be ceded,—ceded in spite of Japan alone,—in spite of England alone. There is a demand and cession that may come perhaps five years from now, perhaps next month. But why not now? It is Russia's opportune moment. Japan is exhausted. Anything may happen!"

Lord Gayrock smiled.

"Well, grant that Russia is to have Manchuria and, as a compliment to our hostess, Japan is allowed to secure Corea;—England will still endure. We have empire in India and Africa that will occupy all our spare time. Whatever the issue in the Far East, our trade with the Chinese ports will remain intact."

But here Tom's interests were touched. "Don't be too sure of that, my lord!" he cried excitedly. "Your firms in Shanghai are raising the deuce of a row about what they call American and German aggression, — commercial aggression, of course. I shouldn't be surprised if this was what Russia had been up to all the time, shutting up those rich Chinese ports to all commerce but her own."

Lord Gayrock looked toward his host with twinkling eyes. Craighead laughed aloud.

"Tom, you've put it in a nutshell."

"Yes, Russia means a regular down-east freeze-out," repeated Tom, much pleased with his own acuteness.

All laughed, and then one of those curious silences that seem to come from nowhere fell on the little group. Each was busy with his own thoughts.

Orchid's voice began in a whisper, which strengthened gradually, giving a curious effect of approach from a great distance.

"All this is of England, and Russia, and the East. But what of us,—what of America? Are not our interests identical with those of England? And if England hesitates, shall we, too, be lost? No, I cannot believe it! England must rouse herself. I pin my faith to the Anglo-Saxon alliance. And now I see that Japan must be included. Japan is the lithe, sleepless dragon that fate has sent to keep guard over the enchanted kingdom of China."

Van's eyes were upon hers. Lord Gayrock saw himself again forgotten. From under his bushy eyebrows he looked hard at the two young faces, Van's alert and excited with impersonal issues, Orchid's more alert, more excited, but with something not altogether impersonal in her restless glance. She seemed almost to be talking for effect, Lord Gayrock thought. How often in London drawing-rooms had he seen this same feverish eagerness masked under the phrases of political debate,—the little painted, cork ducks of national discussion set out in front of a woman's tent of rushes. But in this case what game was sought? These two seemed very close. Yet he remembered that a Mrs. Craighead had been alluded to, and certainly there was a "Tom." Van's low, vibrating voice broke in upon his reverie.

"Yes, Orchid, what of us! The time has come at last when we may dare to call ourselves an empire. In spite of the hoodlums, and the mugwumps, and the sentimentalists, we are an empire, and we must grow. With Cuba and perhaps Hawaii a new era begins. We shall invest great capital in China. We shall build railroads while the engineers of other nations are submitting estimates.

All the manhood in us shall leap to protect our commercial freedom." His tone had taken on the confident, compelling ring of the born orator.

"Mullord, Mullord!" broke in Tom suddenly, his face almost purple, "back Japan with your British fleet, get your concessions from China, and I'll guarantee you *now* a syndicate of a hundred millions, good American dollars, to build factories and railroads, and to open mines!"

"Tom, you're my friend!" cried Van.

"Tom, you're an angel!" beamed his wife.

Lord Gayrock smiled and gave a slight bow, but said nothing. He was still watching faces from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Oh!" said Orchid, with a sort of pent-up vehemence, "let me speak. It is n't all mere trade and commerce. Those are the mere dusty highways down which the real civilization must come. *I* prophesy a rebirth of ideals; a new era of intellectual splendor. The East has always been the cradle of art, and philosophy, and religion. Chinese thought and literature are unworked mines, richer than mountains of coal and copper. All we adore in Japan is of China. She was Japan's sacred Hellas. That war was more than half a crusade, an excuse to arouse China to the protection of her own altars. We Westerners are beginning already to starve for ideals. We are hardening in luxury, growing apathetic with the weight of satisfied personalities. And those who still fret and fume and struggle, — what is it all for? Oh, Van! this is what we need; this is what we are starving for. Do you remember that wonderful Chinese poem I found one day, which says: —

'The lotos-seed is more than a memory in the dark lake'?

It is for this seed that we must search. It is there. I could almost lead you to it. I could — I could *dream* the way!"

Her eyes were wide and starry as those of a sibyl. Van leaned, steeping his soul in their depths.

Lord Gayrock set down his glass and coughed. In a flash Orchid was mere solicitous hostess once more.

"You must think us excitable, my lord," she said with conventional lightness.

She sprang to her feet, and as the others rose, made a little motion toward Craighead, and held out her hand. The young man, however, barely touched it. He felt at that moment that he could not endure the magnetism of personal contact. Muttering some sort of an excuse, he hurried away, anywhere, — anywhere out of that intense atmosphere, — and found himself soon standing amid the cool marble spaces of the moonlight.

A few crickets chirped in the tall grass. A faint splashing of waves came up from the beach below. Van moved mechanically, and for the third time that day, toward the steps that led to the foot of the precipice.

CHAPTER XVII

HIGH-TIDE

THE ladder shot in a zigzag downward through the chasm, turning as many giddy corners as the thoughts in Van's brain. He started nervously as a crag thrust forth the giant hand of its shadow, and blotted out the phantom steps beneath. Luckily there was a stout hand-rail.

He knew, by stumbling against some tufts of dry seaweed, that he had reached bottom. As the sands slipped, with a musical sigh, under his feet, the moon offered him again her goblet of golden nectar, more insidious, after the first draught of calm, than all the bottled sunshine of Épernay. Was it the salt in the air that sparkled like diamond dust?

Do what he would, the tumult was but transferred from the lobby of the castle to the arena of all space. The heated fancies of the lighted dining-room rushed after him in a pack of panting memories. The tension of antagonism was stamped upon his face. Fragments of misty maps, the Mediterranean, the Yellow Sea, whisked up from dark corners, blurred his vision for a moment, then blew off mocking over the living water. The little fleet of yachts nodded and whispered together, dark and threatening as the whole British navy.

The young man drew his hand across his eyes, and stared about him desperately, trying to take in all the refreshing coolness of the objectively real. A few rounded rocks lifted themselves from the flood-tide, like observant seals, with snouts pressed dark against the swell of the burnished waves. Then a subtle perfume which still

clung to his left sleeve took the opportunity to paint a white neck in the moonlight, and burn a smile across the face above it that came and hung painfully near to his lips.

He paced a length of beach, and swore to himself that he was a cool-headed lawyer from Boston. The sandy floor rocked as if it were the deck of a steamer. At one side, on his left, the charging foam swept in airy curves, like the balancing-pole of a tight-rope dancer; on the other, the angular silhouette of the cliff lay as if stained into the long ivory panel.

There was no banishing Orchid from such a mermaid frolic; so he stopped, and deliberately faced the thought of her. The whole evening, with its circle of brilliant issues, had revolved about her. She had neither descended to flattery nor yielded to it. She had rung true at every note.

What insight! What warmth of sympathy! Her thought had flashed ahead of his like a search-light. What a pack of dummies were the rest of the world! Only he and she really knew, really felt the intensity of passing issues — really *lived*. Oh, to be with her at Peking! — as ambassador! — her keen intuition pricking for him the bubbles of rival diplomacy, dictating terms of reconstruction to the coral-capped Professors of the Hanlin University!

The sudden lights of an outward-bound steamer shot up from the plane of the sea. The throbs of submerged machinery came over the silence like the beating of a human heart. The great hull slid by, enamelled in black and silver, not more than a quarter of a mile away. Whither was she bound, to Liverpool or Havre? Tourists crowded her cabins, — wealthy, leisurely tourists, — some *blasé* with travel, others youthfully eager for London, Italy, Paris. Paris! What was there about Paris to fill his throat with sudden suffocation? Truth! Poor little Truth, his wife! How she had kissed him at the last!

How young, how sweet she was! But the other! Her touch alone could char its tokens into the palimpsest of his soul.

He wheeled about sharply, thinking he heard a voice calling from above. The sea drew in a long breath, but there was no other sound.

The waves had crept stealthily higher and higher up the narrowing beach, but the shadow of the cliff still eluded their supple fingers. The impulse seized Van to make himself a boy again, and test the tide. He raised with his foot a redoubt of sand a few inches beyond the last moist inroad of the sea,—a barrier brave and invincible as the Chinese wall,—and waited. A horde of tiny Tartars mounted on sea-horses whose manes streamed backward up the glittering slope, dashed toward him, then paused to cast their circling lariats of foam. With a sound as of simultaneous laughter they drew back, only to spur forward again, bolder, this time,—wheeling, prancing, manœuvring in the light of the moon-shield above, until, with one soft, derisive push, they silently crumbled his shining bastions into a series of melancholy brown lumps.

“I should have built higher,” he muttered.

This time the noise he heard was unmistakable; no voice, but a creaking sound on the ladder. Before turning, he knew well what it was, and for one mad moment was tempted to hide himself behind the rock-shadows or hurl himself into the sea,—anything rather than meet her at this time and place. But she must have seen him. It was too late.

She glided down the ladder (now silvered throughout its entire length), with feet that seemed neither to move nor touch, and flew like a sheaf of concentrated moon-rays across the yellow sand. Van felt something of the terror of a charmed bird. He did not speak or move.

Her left hand was pressed tightly against her heart. She paused a few feet before him, panting. A half-smile

trembled upon her parted lips, and her eyes lifted themselves confidingly to his face. The light seemed to desert the crouching sea, and loose itself among the bronze waves of her hair; the single emerald above her brow became a burning-lens for the jealous soul of the moon.

Craighead remained motionless and silent. A shade, as of pain, crossed the upturned face. The quick breathing had not quite subsided, as she said:—

“Oh, Van! Why did you run away from me? I could n’t bear to let you go back in the morning without a word to tell you—to let you know—how *incomparable* you were to-night!”

Still he did not speak, but his breathing, too, began to come fast.

“It was a revelation, even to me. To you, it must have been self-coronation. I don’t wonder—that after it—you were impelled to come here,”—she flung one bare, white arm out in the direction of the sea,—“here, where one may listen to the soul of the world crooning to itself.”

Craighead threw up his hand with a gesture as if to motion her back.

“How did you dare to come, Orchid? It was not wise. Let us return now, while there is time!”

“Oh, not yet!” she pleaded. “There is something—”

Suddenly he gave a little cry of alarm, and caught her up sheer from the ground. A thin gray lake of sea-water had spread around them, covering him to the knees. He strode up some yards through bits of hurrying seaweed, and reflux rivulets of sand, and deposited his burden on a ridge held up by a flat crown of pebbles.

Her feet were unsteady as he set them down. He was forced to keep his arm around her for a moment. The perfume of her laces stifled him.

“How sudden!” she murmured. “I did not realize that danger was near. And you, Van,—are you not wet?”

"My head envies my heels that dipping," said Craighead, grimly.

Orchid's hand was still crushed against her heart, and now she drooped toward him, as if in pain.

"I am — faint," she whispered.

"Orchid," said the man in tones that were almost pleading, "as soon as you can manage to walk, let us go in! I, too, am unnerved to-night. I am not myself."

"You are more yourself than you have ever been in all your life before," came Orchid's low, rich voice. "That is why I followed you. We have our real good-bye to say to-night."

Craighead groaned.

"I, too, am at my best," she went on. "My moods of self-sacrifice are not frequent. You had better take advantage of this one. I tell you that I have come to give you up, forever!"

A medley of thoughts rushed into Craighead's brain. Suspicion, relief, hope, mistrust, sorrow, credulity, — all came warring together, like actors in an old morality play. Distrust was first victor.

"There is no need that I can see for theatrical farewells," he said sullenly. "We are parted clearly enough as it is."

"Are we parted?" she whispered, and leaned over until her face almost touched his.

He drew back and shivered. "Let it be as you say. Release me, Orchid, for you know your power. Does this admission satisfy your vanity?"

"It may satisfy my vanity, but not my wrongs," she said. "Before I pledge myself, I have one demand, — that you read — this." She flung open her left hand that had been pressed so long against her heart, and showed him a crumpled, blue letter. With a faint sense of sickness he recognized the one she had mailed to Dexter-ville, — the one he had torn in halves, and returned unread.

"This is madness!" he cried. "The past is dead. Why recall it?"

"Yes, it is dead. Are you afraid of its very ghost?"

"Perhaps I am, Orchid. Throw the letter into the sea."

"The next wave would bring it back. No, Van. Ghosts can be exorcised only by being faced and defied."

He rose to his feet and began to pace the sand. She followed him with her eyes. He came back presently and stood before her.

"Be genuine, Orchid! Why are you so anxious for me to do a thing which you know must give me pain, and can be of benefit to no one?"

She rose also, and gazed frankly into his troubled eyes, as she answered, —

"We both speak the truth to-night, Van, I want you to read it, so that in the future you may exonerate me from the cruel charges you have made. It was unfair of you to take my telegram for cowardice. 'Yes' and 'No' do *not* divide the universe between them. I asked the dear Van I knew to wait for my written word. Don't protest, Van! I knew it came too late. I tell you, I am prepared to give you up to-night, — if you desire it. But I want you to know — you ought to want to know — what I was really capable of. You misjudged me, Van. I may have been light, vain, theatrical, to all others, but not to you. Oh, Van, do not refuse me! If I were a nobler woman I might destroy it unread, as you suggest; but perhaps I am not great enough for that. I have borne much, and I will bear more, but — this last request! — in justice, Van" — her voice began to tremble piteously, — "in mercy — oh, if you ever cared for me, even for a *moment*, read, read what I wrote you then!"

She covered her face with one hand; the other still held out toward Van the crumpled letter.

"I will read it. Don't sob so, — I cannot bear it; this

is against my reason and my judgment, but I will read it."

She moved away, and stood motionless at the water's edge, gazing out over the uncertain sea.

Craighead held the torn pieces at such a slant that the moonlight brought into distinctness each line of Orchid's bold chirography. His heart sank as he read:—

"Your letter is here, — against my lips, against my heart. Its cold masterfulness intoxicates me. The Van I know and — love smiles behind each rigid line. The fires of a snow-crowned volcano burn deep! I can trust you, Van. You are generous. You cannot expect me to crowd the infinity of my emotions into the one useless word 'yes.'"

"You know I am yours; I need no test. But the night of that wonderful evening I could not sleep. Every word you had spoken, every look of your splendid eyes, each touch of your hand, ran through my veins again and again in reiterated lines of fire. How is it that we have both been blind so long?

"But you are right. I feel myself noble in spirit, worthy to be your mate! For now, when the fiercest temptation of life assails me, I think first only of you, — my love, my King! You, a leader of men, — I must not spoil your shining future. I repeat all I said. I will give you every proof that you, in your nobility, would ask. And this is my greatest, — that I would sacrifice myself for you. I am only a weak, loving, trembling woman, dazzled and drunken by visions of what must not be. My whole soul leaps toward you, as a deer from a burning wood.

"Oh, come back soon to me, Van! We have reached a stage where things must be spoken, eye to eye, and heart to heart. We have such a great work to do together. I will be your humble helper, Van, to use for eye, oracle, or scribe, as you may need. I will breathe a clear, pure blast of love into the burning focus of your ideals. And Tom will trust us, and be glad for us to work together.

"Poor Tom! He was brought home to me to-day unconscious, with a sudden attack. He lies in the next room with his doctors about him. It is his second shock. Even if you

needed me this moment, I know that you would not counsel me to leave him. But there is no thought of injustice toward him in our love for each other, — I know that! We can be as generous to him as he is to us.

“Oh, Van! We shall have wonderful years before us, all the dearer, all the more useful, because of their restraint. How can I wait for your return! Only believe that I am yours to the innermost fibre of my being, and to all eternity!”

The letter fell to the sand, and lay there like a shadow. Craighead stared at it, and stared, with eyes fixed as if in death.

The slender, averted figure by the sea, wondering at the long silence, turned and saw him. She drew breath quickly, hesitated, then ran toward him, and falling on her knees in the sand, gazed up into his rigid face.

“Van! — Van!”

She put one hand out toward him, as a child might have done, and tried to bend his gaze to hers.

Visions of that last evening they had passed together just before his journey South, — of what they two had suffered since, — of the possible dazzling future of diplomatic co-partnership which nothing but his own brutal injustice had destroyed, bewildered his brain with their rapid succession. Truth’s miserable misconception of the Simpson case contrasted itself with Orchid’s tempting picture. Even now, why might it not be possible? But no, even at this instant of temptation, the human ecstasy of her presence showed him that it was not possible, — that it never could have been.

Suddenly he shook her off and stood upright.

“Orchid!” he said, in a low, strained voice she had never heard before, “if this that you have forced upon me is not more than you yourself have suffered, then there is no expiation for me to make you in this world. Perhaps it is better that I should have known. I was a fool, a brute, a dissector! Yes, we had no thought of wronging

Tom. Let us believe all that is best and noblest of ourselves! But the past is irrevocable!"

She had risen too, and stood very close to him, erect, but with a peculiar swaying motion, like that of a frail, tall lily which the next breath must lay against his heart. Her head drooped, and her voice was so low that he had to bend to catch the words, —

"Why — do you say that the past — is — irrevocable?"

He struck his clenched fist against the air. "Orchid! you know! What use is there for self-torture? I have not only myself to think of, now!"

She threw her head upward. "Yes — yes, I know!" she cried. "I never forget! But is Tom the only person supposed to be capable of generosity?"

Van fell back a step. His face showed ghastly in the moonlight.

"Truth!" he stammered. "You don't mean *Truth*! Why, I told you — she told you — by what peculiar ties of honor we are bound!"

"And is that pale, cold abstraction you call your wife to come between us forever? She is not your wife; she is an interloper! What has she to do with us? We two belong to each other! I will not give you up! never — *never*!"

Her eyes were blazing now, her whole slight figure electric with passion. She flung herself on his breast with a wonderful cry. For one desperate moment he tried to repel her, but her words were a spring flood, her white arms osiers. Her broken love-words darted, like flame, against the flimsy barriers of his self-restraint. All at once he gave way, and caught her in his arms.

"I have no words," he said, with a dry sob in his voice. "Oh, Orchid! Who is to blame for this? But it is the last — our farewell — forever!"

She laughed out clear in the moonlight. "Farewell! This is only the beginning! Van, kiss me! You have never yet kissed me!"

"But you said — you promised —"

"Kiss me, Van! I am very close!"

The blood in Craighead's veins was fire. Her face, raised to his, was a white, fragrant rose. All the bliss that might have been his, all, now, that could never be, caught him up, whirling, in its central heat.

"Orchid! Orchid! You see — it must be the end!"

She said nothing; only strained him closer. Her eyes were half closed; her lips trembling. He let his fall nearer and nearer, as if testing himself, as if measuring how far sanity could reach into madness.

The moon, the sea, and Orchid's face began to whirl round in one streaming circle of light. The warm, sweet breath, now growing a little frightened, — the lips, quivering with all that unspoken words can say, — drew nearer — nearer — nearer —

Then the two faces touched, and heaven and earth fell away, leaving only two human creatures on a long, white strip of sand that seemed the shivering diameter of eternity.

In another moment he had wrenched himself away, and was lost in black shadows.

Orchid stood alone, just as he had left her. The mocking tide lifted itself and swirled up in a sweep of white that almost touched her white feet, then ran back, as if in terror. One dark cloud pushed aside the moon. Orchid stretched her bare arms outward. The gesture had the dignity of an invocation.

But the next wave fell short!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DAWNING OF TRUTH

BOSTON is stuffy in summer. The apartment hotels are closed for the benefit of the manager, who runs a side-show somewhere down on the south coast. The streets of the Back Bay are given over to wild Irish, who disport in pairs, of dark evenings, exchanging comments anent the social frailties upon which those boarded-up windows have, until recently, transmitted light. The deserted stone steps make enviable trysting-places. The lonely married man, toiling to earn what his family spend in demi-toilettes at rustic "hops," withdraws to more genial down-town hospitalities, — Young's, or perhaps Billy Parks, with his brace of "Hinglish" mutton-chops, now, alas! no more.

But it is stuffy enough, at best. Along the narrow business streets the shop doors hang open, and panting tradesmen loll therein clad in gauzy jackets that apologize for the horror of shirt-sleeves; and a smell of musty boots, or of half-melting rubber-goods greets the straggling explorer; while, in more recondite lanes, the hot effluvium of food rises from basement restaurants, where dishes of grapes and spotty peaches still attract the more epicurean of flies. The elevator boy in your office building sleeps now more than half the time, until you are forced to wonder how he spends his time at night; and, in place of the steady flow, toward the sign on your ground-glass door, of ample waistcoated and smiling clients, your profoundest meditations are interrupted by some questionable gentleman with dejected collar,

who wants you to get him out of a police scrape, or lend him a small bill.

And yet, to be thoroughly initiated, there is a deathless charm in this kind of Bohemian, "undress" life. Craig-head had revelled in it for years. The current of seasonable sounds, of odors, with their associated ideas, circulated properly in his professional blood. It was one of the conditions of the Boston game, parallel to November blizzards and March dust-storms. Law-books, there is no denying, have, about the last of August, a peculiar smell, that almost brings tears to the eyes, — a fact which, doubtless, was as well known to Samuel Adams and James Otis in the good old days when the little island town pastured its cows upon three sleepy hills.

Thus it came about that the memory of Ponkatuck began slowly to lose its keen and harassing distinctness. Yet, had Norton been in Boston, instead of helping pretty girls to land cunners off Nahant rocks, a wager might safely be laid that he would have noticed a change in his senior partner. It was not, perhaps, in Van's scrupulous observance of hours, nor in the methodical diligence with which he filed away facts in the pigeon-holes of his brain, nor yet in the Spartan sternness with which he repulsed the electric blandishments of Keith's. It was something intangible, a manner, a tightening of lines under the moustache, a sort of subdued and calculated energy, such as a good racer might feel when looking out upon a long, hard course, and who feels exhilaration, rather than despair, at a glimpse of the far goal.

Perhaps a keen observer would have pondered also upon a noticeable restraint in situations where Van might, justifiably, have kicked over, say, a waste-paper basket, or thrown a bill-holder after a retreating tramp. The head of the firm was, at least, more economical of adjectives. He no longer banged open the door of mornings, or stalked in with the threatening proprietorship of a pirate captain; nor did he jerk his hat upon a nail as if to test the

tenacity of its screws. That shrewd moralist, the janitor, must have puzzled himself to guess what unwonted hap could have befallen Mr. Craighead's self-esteem.

But changes never come singly; and there was another, an important one, in the raw material that Van allowed himself for mental digestion. It was no longer the great brown tomes of reports or statistics sleeping familiarly under layers of kindred dust; it was the latest diplomatic reviews, government books, "blue," yellow, green, and all other colors of the rainbow; consular reports, especially English ones; records of courts, notably East Indian, and of extra-territorial jurisdiction, Egypt, China, and Japan; all of these and more, that now lay in professional confusion upon his desk. The "London Times" arrived almost daily, also the "Journal des Débats" and the "Berlin Tageblatt;" and, after due time, he revelled weekly in the "North China News" and the "Japan Mail." Gradually he acquired the habit of taking these treasures to his solitary suite at the Hanover, where he perused them far into the night, and sometimes, by preference, during the day also.

Some weeks later, Norton, rushing up to Boston in a spasm of conscientious inquisitiveness, caught Van unlocking the Devonshire Street door. Within, a mass of fresh mail, which had been slipped through the narrow bronze orifice, fairly littered the floor.

The packages flew like spray as Norton danced in among them.

"Hallo! What on earth! Been starting a club?"

Van smiled, but disdained direct reply. He gathered up the papers carefully, and, as they tumbled on the desk, asked:—

"What sort of pride would you take, Quincy, in having your partner Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary say to the court of — er — Siam? The sign would read 'Law office of the honorable,' etc., etc., and you could slip in under the 'honorable.'"

Norton tilted his head to one side and gazed on his partner with interest.

"That's the game, is it? Caught it at Ponkatuck, I guess."

Craighead reddened slightly.

"What in the — How'd you know I'd been to Ponkatuck?"

"Oh, the wily Orchid only wrote it to three of her dearest friends! Besides, it was in all the society papers. You can't expect to chum with an ex-Minister of England and — er — the most dangerous woman in America without being found out."

"I merely ran down over a Sunday to try a few polemics with old Gayrock," he explained, casually.

"Ah, just so!" drawled the youth. "Saw nothing of the lady, of course."

Van was angered to feel himself reddening still more.

"I don't see that it is any of your — business!"

For some reason this remark threw Norton into the highest state of glee. He seated himself carefully on his desk, threw one leg over the other, and his hat in the corner, and said, in a soothing tone:—

"Well, don't get so huffy about it, old sport, or I'll think it more serious than it is. I'll bet my front teeth she played you off against old slow-coach! Now, honest, did n't she?"

Van regarded his companion with slow scorn.

"Do you know, Norton! sometimes I am forced to regret that I ever took you in —"

"Oh, but you did n't!" interposed the youth. "You never will! I'm much more likely to take *you* in!"

Craighead turned to the window to hide a most unwilling grin.

"Change the subject," he said shortly. "This one is n't safe to joke about."

"Oh, it's safe enough now," said Norton, innocently. "She and Tom are out West with Lord Gayrock, you know."

Craighead wheeled about.

"Out West! — I had n't heard. How long will they be away?"

"Oh, no telling! They've gone to look at lands, I believe. Special car, champagne, flowers, and all that!"

"It will be a good thing for Tom," said Van in more normal tones. "I have no doubt that the trip will mean for him enormous English investments in Western stocks."

"And I have no doubt that the trip will mean for Orchid enormous personal investments in English social stock. Bet she goes to London for a season, after this!"

Van muttered something that sounded like, "Wish to God she would!"

"Speaking of London, and travel, and all that, — what do you hear from Mrs. Craighead? Is n't it time she was thinking of coming back?"

Craighead glanced up quickly, as if to detect a hidden motive in the inquiry, but the boy's face wore its sweetest, frankest look.

"I do not expect her until toward the end of September."

As though he had suspected Van's fleeting doubt of his sincerity, Norton sprang from the desk, drew his chair near his companion, and said in earnest tones: —

"Do you know, Van, I really think that little girl, — pardon me, — Mrs. Craighead, — the sweetest, truest, loveliest woman I have ever known in all my life. It gives me a pang to see how you and Mrs. Adams are bent on educating her out of all her delicious crudities and mistakes. Her voice, — there was never anything like it! I could actually sit in raptures for hours, just to hear her say the multiplication table!"

Craighead laughed, but his face had changed.

"These other women," Norton went on, "are like hothouse flowers or artificial roses, all jumbled up without

any stems, or character, or individuality; and she is like a beautiful wild lily growing beside a pool. You see, she actually makes me poetical!"

He laughed at himself, but his voice broke slightly.

"Why, Quin, old chap! I believe you're half in love with her!"

Norton did not laugh this time. His young eyes were fine and true as they looked into Van's.

"It won't spoil my life," he said bravely. "I'm too young, and got too much ginger in me for that. But I'll never meet another woman that I can love as I could have loved her!"

One morning, about a week after this episode, Craighead found upon his bed-room table a letter, and a large, square mailed package, both from Truth. He opened the letter first.

"DEAR MR. CRAIGHEAD" [it began], — "My pictures are finished at last, and I hasten to send them to you and grandma. Mrs. Adams thinks them extremely good, but I know they are entirely too pretty for the real me. I wonder if you will like them. I saw a picture in the Luxembourg by Bastien le Page that Mrs. Adams says you think is like my "type." It is a very ugly peasant woman sitting on the ground. There is a very famous artist here, — I cannot remember how to spell his name, — who is very anxious to do my portrait in oils. Mrs. Adams says that this is a very great compliment to me, and she thinks I ought to do it, but I don't think I shall. He is a Frenchman, and wears his beard in two ridiculous little inverted pyramids under his chin, — besides, I don't believe I could keep still for so long. We are going to take a little trip to Venice in spite of the hot weather. Mrs. Adams has been talking about it and showing me pictures, until now I simply must go. I know it will be like a sea-fairy palace that rises quietly through the night and floats on the water's surface only as long as you are there, and when you leave sinks down again. We are afraid to try Florence or Rome on account of the fever. We are still in Paris, as you will see. I am having

many beautiful dresses made, but I should not get so many if it was n't for Mrs. Adams. I fear she is going to try to force me to go out a great deal next winter, but I hope that you will take my part, and not her's. She is so good and kind, though! It seems impossible that she is not my own blood-kin. How I wish we could have a quiet little home in the suburbs! A hotel is only an imitation home, after all. I am thinking now of taking painting lessons when I get back. I reckon I'm too old to do anything great, but I should like to try. We expect to sail from Liverpool three weeks from to-day. In London we shall try to get rooms near Westminster Abbey. I feel that the Poets' Corner is going to be the core of the world to me. I have wished for you very often, and grandma, too. Your letters are always a great delight. I wish I could write you more entertainingly of our enjoyment, but I am waiting to tell you in person. I shall be very happy to get back again. I hope you will like the photographs.

Very sincerely, Your loving wife,

TRUTH."

Van smiled as he refolded this letter. Then his face grew grave, and he sat quite still for some moments, staring into vacancy. He was thinking of what Norton had said of Truth a week before. He gave an impatient sort of sigh, lifted the square package, and cut the strings. Opening it he disclosed two large photographs, each in its envelope. He took out one at random.

A radiant, *fin de siècle* Parisian beauty smiled into his eyes. It was Truth, — and yet not Truth. Where had she learned that smile, that provoking, coquettish tilt to the head? He suddenly recalled a fleeting glance she had given him on the beach at Mississippi Sound. That Truth had seemed long vanished. Doubtless the dress, a creation in white and black gauze, had something to do with the airy unreality of the picture. On the fluffy blond head was perched a hat of broad and curving white lines surmounted by a cascade of black plumes. The brilliant eyes were overflowing with fun, the lips had caught all the cupids of mischief in their dimpled cor-

ners. A bewitching, Bohemian, irresistible face it was, — a thing of sunshine and flowers. It would be worth a man's whole life to keep those sweet lips forever smiling, — those clear eyes unprofaned by tears. He looked long at the picture, and one would have said that he scarcely breathed. He placed the photograph upright against a pile of law-books on the table, and slowly opened the second envelope.

If the first had been a surprise, this was a revelation. The one had drawn his unwary soul outward, the other flung it back, cowering, upon itself. It was merely the head and throat of a very young girl. The scant drapery about the shoulders was lost in a play of shifting cloud-shadows. The picture seemed the crystallization of a mood, an expression, rather than the mere delineation of a human face. The cheek was turned slightly aside and upward, in the pose of Le Page's Jeanne d'Arc; the light, straight hair streamed backward like wind-smitten flame; the great eyes, upturned, were gazing, unterrified, into the face, it seemed, of Death itself; and the childish lips were parted as if whispering to that awful visitor. The very splendor of this woman's soul exaggerated her evident youth. So might the Maid of Orleans have looked as she rode into battle, or some virgin martyr before the last spring of the panther. Craighead sat staring at it until its pathetic nobility became almost unbearable. He resented the fact that any man but he should have seen that look on his wife's face. In some strange way he resented the look itself. Perhaps it was too permanent a witness to her capacity for love and suffering.

He placed the Parisian photograph on the mantel of the drawing-room, but the other was set on a little table beside his bed.

Norton was now back from Nahant, working at the office with a steadiness that showed his determination to make up for lost time. He was at the Hanover a few

evenings after the arrival of the photographs, and, entering the drawing-room, gave a quick exclamation and hurried to the mantel. Craighead watched him with curiosity that had just a little cruelty in it. At first the young man did not speak, only gazed hungrily upon the pictured face. Then he shook his head jerkily from side to side as if in gesticulative argument with some unseen adversary, and at last burst out:—

“Don’t tell me that’s not the loveliest woman God ever made!”

“I have no intention of telling you so,” laughed Van. “It *is* a rather stunning Paris frock, is n’t it?”

“Frock!” exclaimed the junior partner in scorn. “What’s ‘frock’ got to do with it? She’d be an angel in corn sacking!”

Old Craighead, too, turned up one fine afternoon. He sat in a chair directly opposite the mantel, and his keen eyes wandered furtively from time to time toward the new picture; but feeling assured that his son was expecting some comment, he doggedly avoided the subject, and restricted his utterance principally to sullen grunts.

The avoidance was so obvious that the younger Craighead’s patience gave way. He took the photograph from its place, and, offering it to his father, said, “Here’s a picture of Truth, taken in Paris.”

The old man held it much as St. Anthony might have done, had Parisian photographs been known in his day, then carefully put it back, screwed his upper lip to the left, and remarked:—

“Gew-gaws and fripperies dew make a sight o’ difference in women.”

“I don’t think that it is all the effect of ‘frippery,’” said Van. “You must see how she is improving.”

“You can’t always sometimes tell!” reiterated the old man with obstinacy. “Them Paris women are great on makin’-up. I know ‘em!”

“I have another picture. Wait a moment.” A sudden

desire had flashed into Van's mind to see what this hard old philosopher would think of the other study of Truth's face. He went into his dressing-room to get it.

On receiving this, the old man made no pretence of indifference. He took it to the strong light of a window, and scrutinized it long. Then he returned to the mantel, placed it beside the other picture, and studied them both. The son could make nothing of his face.

"Well?" he inquired impatiently.

"Well!" echoed the old man, sarcastically. He turned about, stopped squarely before his son, fixed his hard, bright old eyes on those of Van, and said:—

"Van der Weyde, ye'd better keep that last picter handy. It'll do ye good!" Without another word he picked up his hat and left the room.

One phrase in Truth's letter kept recurring to Van with irritating frequency. "How I wish we could have a quiet little home in the suburbs! A hotel is only an imitation home." At the first instant of reading he had realized what such a change of residence might mean to a child still homesick for her trees and flowers and birds of the South. He made a slight, though honest, effort to reason himself into acquiescence with the request, but suburban life had always been peculiarly distasteful to him. Visions of time-tables, rainy nights, snow-blocked streets, sick carriage horses, and obstreperous grooms rose in a grimacing swarm. No! He couldn't do it. It was too much of a sacrifice. But he was perfectly willing to make some compromise, to arrange some other pleasure or luxury that might partly atone for the refusal of this. He thought of a diamond necklace. Most women would sell their souls for a diamond necklace. But then Truth was not like other woman; in fact, she was not yet a woman at all. In this perplexity he decided to consult Norton.

"Look here, Quin," he said, "Truth—Mrs. Craighead,

that is — will be here soon, and I am racking my brains to think of some pleasant little surprise for her.”

“Flowers!”

“Oh, those, of course! But I mean something bigger and more permanent. She — er — wanted to move into the suburbs, and have a house of our own, but I must confess I could n’t bring myself to it. I’m away from her most of the time as it is, and I would like even less to have her out there alone.”

Norton dropped his head to his hands. “Let me think,” he said slowly. “She’s devoted to her grandmother, isn’t she, and often quite homesick?”

“I believe she is.”

“Then why not bring the old lady up to meet her?”

Van slapped his knee. “The very thing!” he cried. “Quin, you are a genius! Now why did n’t I think of that?”

“Because I love her and you don’t,” thought the boy.

All through Truth’s absence Craighead had kept up a desultory correspondence with the grandmother at Dexterville. Truth’s letters to her were regularly forwarded to Boston, but always with the request to return as soon as read. From these utterly spontaneous writings Van had gained a much clearer insight into the girl’s rapid mental development than he could ever have done from her direct epistles. Sometimes a phrase startled him with its flashing beauty of thought, or a single adjective stood out pure and inevitable, as the scarlet on a red-bird’s wing.

As for Mrs. Dexter’s letters, they were exactly like herself, delicate, old-fashioned, and pure. Out of them her sweet thoughts leaned like pale flowers from a stiff old trellised vine.

On receipt of Van’s hint that she should be in Boston to meet and welcome the returning loved one, she sent, by return mail, many pages of pathetic longings and misty negatives. Her letter was tremulous, tearful, —

almost like a prayer. "How could he think it possible for her, an old, old lady, to undertake such a journey? And how could she leave the dear old place, even for a week, while he was coolly suggesting that she spend the coming winter in the North? Yet to see her baby,—her darling,—and so much sooner than she could have dared to hope!"

"She will come," said Van, smiling to himself, "but I shall have to go for her." In both statements he was right.

It was almost October. The Japanese ivy on Trinity Church was turning into ruddy bronze; that on the Art Museum melting jealously into the terra-cotta bas-reliefs across the front elevation. The Public Garden gathered twilight mists above the little tea-cake and lozenge-shaped flower-beds, and the swan-boats had entered upon their period of annual hibernation.

Van had ascertained from the pompous manager of the Hanover that he could secure a fifth room to his suite, a pleasant, desirable room with a little outlook upon the park, and windows where the low, shy Boston sun would be forced, in spite of itself, to linger. This room he now ordered to be furnished in perfect tone with the others, and, when he had seen the last piece of furniture put in place, started South to ensnare the new occupant.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIFTH ROOM

TRUTH was coming! Truth would be here to-day! Mrs. Dexter fluttered about the strange suite of rooms like a white canary. Her trembling hands scarcely dared to adjust the slender vases, which all the morning she had been filling with flowers, — Southern flowers for the most part, such as jasmine, tea-roses, and early camellias. Palms and ferns rose from shadowy corners, and the whole place had taken on the look of a bridal bower.

Van, smiling to himself, followed the old lady about to lift for her the heavier ornaments. He felt an incredible amount of excitement, due, he assured himself, mainly to sympathy with this tender, vibrating mother-love, scarcely able to contain itself behind the bars of the dilatory hours.

“When did you say the Cephalonia would be in?” she inquired for the sixth time that morning.

“At two, — at two exactly,” replied Van. One might have thought that his assurances were becoming unjustifiably accurate, as if the “Cunarder” were but a “shore-line” train from New York. But he added, “We have just got a wire from the islands that she is outside, and has signalled for a pilot.”

“You think it could n’t *possibly* get in before two?”

Van laughed. “No, she will hardly get up to the dock ahead of time; but I shall go down about one.” He was to go alone, for Mrs. Dexter had decided not to risk the strain of an unexpected meeting before strangers.

“What a silly old woman you must think me! I never expected to be as excited as this in all my life again.

But Truthie, — she's so much to me — !" The gentle voice faltered.

"Indeed I love you for it!" cried Van, heartily. "I wish to be included in every thought."

Mrs. Dexter laid her thin hand on his for an instant, and lifted soft eyes which spoke more than words.

"The flowers are pretty, are they not?" she asked, after a little pause. "Truthie has always loved them so much. I tried very hard to find a few blossoms of the magnolia. Those were always her favorites."

At last twelve o'clock struck. Van gave a sigh of relief.

"Please go right down to lunch without me," pleaded Mrs. Dexter. "I could n't eat a mouthful. I'm too happy!"

"Really? Well then, good-bye! I sha'n't come up again after lunch. If the boat's on time I shall have her back in three hours; but don't be alarmed if we should n't turn up before dark."

"Remember in any case you're to keep my secret. Don't drop the faintest hint, — she's very quick! Remember, you *promised*!"

"You may rest assured that she shall suspect nothing," laughed Van, who, from the first had acquiesced readily in the humor of an arrangement that could never have found its origin in him. In his childhood's home a returning traveller would have been welcomed with little more preparation than if he had stepped down to the post-office to mail a letter.

"If there's anything you want just ring the bell for the boy," he said as a last injunction. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, and God bless you!" whispered Mrs. Dexter.

Left to herself, the old lady slowly retraced her steps through the rooms. The pretty suite was indeed transformed by her tender love. She circled it now, giving a last touch to every spray of flowers, every shining leaf.

With all comprehensive care she stepped from the parlor into Van's bedroom to see that his belongings were in as perfect order as Truth's wifely pride could possibly desire; and she did not forget to set a little bunch of violets upon his chiffonnier, as Truth had been accustomed to do, in spring days, upon her grandfather's desk.

Deliberately leaving the door ajar she passed into Truth's little bedroom, glancing about with a more than tender light in her soft brown eyes. She stooped to adjust again, to the fraction of an inch, the embroidered counterpane, and the choice laces upon the pillow, souvenirs of her own bridal days, which, long packed away in antiquated trunks, had been brought up now to add sanctity to her dear one's home-coming. In the grate burned a cheerful fire of cannel coal, for the days were already chill; and before it a great white rug of some soft Eastern goat's-hair held a pair of satin slippers lined with eiderdown. Around the wall hung photographs of the Big House and grounds, taken to Van's order by a Montgomery artist, and on the mantel were several of Truth's childhood's treasures, which had been overlooked in her first hegira. Mrs. Dexter's eyes travelled slowly from Truth's room to that of Craighead's and back again. She sighed, and for a moment pressed her forefinger sharply against her pale lips.

The next was the fifth room, her own. A yellow bird hopped and sang within his golden cage at the window, a sort of vivification of the sunshine that poured through the panes. Mrs. Dexter stood before the bright hearth, gazing into Truth's photograph, which occupied the centre of the mantel. She took it down as if to study it more carefully, then kissed and caressed it until it quivered and blurred under the joy of her own tears. From it she raised her beautiful eyes to her husband's pictured face, which hung above, and the tears now fell down suddenly to the crape at her breast.

Replacing the photograph, she lowered herself stiffly

to her knees beside a chair and prayed, — prayed long and earnestly, the hope and sweet light of anticipation on her face changing gradually into a sort of terror. Her rapidly whispered tones became semi-audible, flinging out impassioned phrases, as a frightened child throws out a shielding arm. "If I am weak," she cried, "if I sin in being cowardly, dear God, look into my tortured heart and see what I endure! I am old and feeble. I must soon pass from earth, — but my darling is so young, with all her life before her! Young people cannot feel things as the old. It is not right that they should. O Father! have mercy! Show me the right way!" Her head was thrown upward, now, and her face twitched in suppressed agony. Her eyes met those of her husband. She cowered a little. "O John," she whispered, "help me, dear! Ask God to help me! If I have done what you would not approve, forgive me! She is all that we have on earth; I must not wrong her with my own convictions! At least let to-day be hers! Help me hide it from her, John! Be with us in this meeting!"

Her head sank to the chair, and she remained sobbing for many long moments; then, little by little, the sweet calm came again.

Craighead waited on the great dock, an unimportant unit in a mass of expectant, shivering humanity. Occasionally the sun glimmered through Arctic clouds; and green, forbidding water, foul with rubbish, slopped against the greener piles of the pier. News came that the ocean wanderer had long since taken her pilot far out beyond Great Brewster, and was now leisurely steaming up the Bay.

Shortly after two, eyes, strained to catch the first gray outline, were rewarded by the dawning of a dark wedge between misty harbor islands; and, a few moments later, a hoarse whistle only just preceded the looming

growth of her huge black hull against the Winthrop headlands.

Then followed the usual running about of dock-hands and the uncoiling of ropes right under the impassive noses of Custom House officials whose stiff insolence notified a smuggling public of Uncle Sam's contempt for the effete nations of the outer world.

Van saw Judge Adams leading a group of friends and relatives through the crowd, and shrank back out of sight. It was not his purpose to welcome Truth as one of a committee. He searched the nearing deck with keen eyes, but saw only a confused flutter of capes and pocket-handkerchiefs as the huge machine back-watered herself into broadside passivity to the gentle persuasion of the tide.

Where was Truth? Perhaps she had not come, after all! Many vigorous young women leaned over the rail, but none appeared to be singling him out.

The white, seething water boiled up and shook the pier to its foundations. The "*Cephalonia's*" quarter had turned away, provokingly, and needed the argument of a pair of stout cables sent her by a dancing dory.

At last she drew up slowly, conquered, along the wharf which seemed itself to move, and two lines of joyous "hurrahs!" mingled above the still intervening gulf. Gangways were adjusted, and the crowd began to rush. Craighead hung back. He smiled a little incredulously to feel his heart keeping time with the panting of the engine. Should he kiss Truth before all those people? Would she be disappointed if he did n't?

He made his way slowly toward the bridge, but before he could set foot upon it, saw Mrs. Adams's portly form dawn at the upper end. She was flushed, and her honest face turned backward over her shoulder as she laughed and joked with the chuckling Judge. Van recognized several intimate friends in the jam, — and, a little in the rear of the others, saw Norton's latest Derby hat bend and bow.

Craighead stood motionless and watched the approach of the party with fascinated eyes. Was that indeed Truth with whom Norton was speaking, — that jaunty, golden-haired, perfectly-attired young woman? Yes, for he had seen her before, in a Parisian photograph. At the time he had thought the transcript flattering. He smiled at the recollection.

The roses in her cheeks glowed under Norton's eyes. That young person's face told more than he realized. Craighead frowned instinctively, and at that moment Truth saw him. The color died, and he could see her hand go swiftly to her heart. Norton looked up also and saw his senior. "Hullo! Here she is!" he cried in frankest delight. "You were nearly too late, old man!"

The little party crossed the bridge and clustered about Craighead. His first greeting was for Mrs. Adams. "Out with you!" cried that beaming matron in response to his amenities, "you wouldn't know the difference if I were painted blue. You have eyes only for Truth!" Her smile challenged congratulations for her charge.

Van hesitated for a moment with an awkwardness unusual to him.

"He's *afraid* of her! He don't know who it is!" declared Norton in a confidential stage-whisper, at which all laughed and felt at ease.

"Right you are, Quin!" said the senior, as he took Truth's two hands in his. "Are you sure it is you, Truth, and not some fashion-plate come to life?"

Truth's blushes flowed back in a tide; she stammered in pretty confusion. "Yes, I *believe* it's me! Mrs. Adams says it is!"

To extricate Truth from the bright network of jests, smiles, and congratulations (for other friends were arriving each moment) was not an easy task, but finally Van accomplished it and hurried her through the crowd toward the waiting carriage.

"How is grandma?" was her first eager question, as

the carriage door slammed and the horses started over the cobble-stones.

"Right as a trivet! But — do you know — you have n't greeted me yet?"

Truth shrank back, and in an embarrassed and frightened voice faltered out, "Everything seems so — strange just at first."

Craighead drew himself erect and maintained a hurt silence. In a moment he felt little gloved fingers slipped into his. "Don't think me silly or ungrateful! I am gladder to get back than I can say, and I used to think of you all the time." He smiled kindly and pressed her hand, but did not offer again to kiss her.

"Have you been hearing from grandma often?"

"Yes, quite often."

"Oh, it was good of you to write to her! But you are always good."

A nervous silence fell between them. They had passed now the rows of unsavory warehouses, and streets grew familiar. Truth peered eagerly from the window. "Dear old Boston!" she cried fervently.

Craighead laughed. "Have you eyes for Boston still? Most Americans leave all power of appreciation in Paris."

"Why, I like Boston *lots* better! Paris is beautiful, of course, but there's something about it that makes me think of the 'whited sepulchre.' Mrs. Adams used to laugh at me and tell me that I was n't a good American, but I never could get over the feeling. Even the little horse-chestnut trees seemed affected and unreal, and the people in the streets were so rude! What I did like, though, were the suburbs, — St. Cloud, and Fontainebleau, and —"

"You are a queer little thing," said Van, turning to look at her again. Whatever her dislike of Paris, its garments evidently clothed her, and Van found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the bewitching vision beside him with the awkward child in a gingham

frock he had so recently known. Truth chattered on nervously.

"You know we spent most of our time in Paris going to dressmakers, and shopping in the funny little shops, for Mrs. Adams would n't let me go to the big bazaars. Oh, she did make me buy such loads of clothes! I am afraid they will cost a great deal, but she said that you said for me to have them."

"Quite right. And were you willing to leave all the attractions of dressmakers and shops?"

"Yes, because grandma was n't there, and — you."

The door of the hotel was reached. Truth sprang out with the light buoyancy she had once envied in another woman. The porters stared, not believing their eyes. Van and his wife went up the elevator in silence, and in silence threaded the corridors; but at the threshold of their own apartments Truth wheeled about with both hands extended. "Do you know, — I just love to be back! I never thought a hotel could feel like home, but this does now!" As the door flung open she paused, gave an ecstatic gasp, and rushed like a bee to the flowers.

"Oh, the dear, precious things! Regular home-flowers too! Roses, and jasmines, and even camellias. The jasmines are exactly like those that run up our gallery posts at home. Precious little stars! How good, — how sweet of you to think of this welcome!"

She clasped her hands; her eyes fairly worshipped him. She trembled and hesitated, as though about to start forward, but some shy reflex of thought sent her into retreat among the palms. The situation was a trifle intoxicating.

Van cleared his throat. "You — er — give me too much credit, I assure you. I will explain later; but now there is a matter of which I must speak at once, a new arrangement, a proposed addition to our suite."

The light died out of Truth's face. He might have waited a little while before forcing her into a common-

place decision. He had not even bidden her welcome. Perhaps it was because she was so silly in the carriage.

Van hastened before her into her little bedroom. She followed him with drooping head and downcast eyes. She did not look up as he stopped before the door that had always been locked, and, seizing the knob somewhat noisily, said in clear, distinct tones:—

“This door leads into a room which you have never seen, a fifth room to our suite, excellent, sunny, and well-heated. I have been keeping the refusal of it until your arrival, and wish you now to decide whether you would care to have it for the winter.”

Truth’s heart grew a little bitter. This certainly could have waited ten minutes—an hour—even a day. It must be that he wished to have no sentimental greetings, and took this way of avoiding them. She choked down her disappointment as best she could and answered, quite naturally, “What do you think we could use it for?”

“An extra room soon becomes a necessity. You spoke more than once in your letters of taking painting and music lessons. This would make an ideal studio.”

She looked up for the first time. Had he been planning for her, after all? His answering smile was very sweet, but he hurried on.

“Yes, it could either be a studio or a delightful guest-chamber. Suppose, for instance, that grandma were to be in Boston.”

“Grandma! Oh, if I only thought that she would come! Do you think she really might? Have you written anything about it? I know she *would n’t* come, but only the thought of seeing mummie *here*—!”

With one quick gesture Van threw wide the door. Instead of the cold harshness of an unused room, Truth caught a dazed impression of sunlight, flowers, and dainty furnishings. Directly opposite, a window lifted a great shield of sunlight against the soft gloom. A strange sense of familiarity shivered through her,—all this in an instant.

Then she gave a low cry. There was a rush, and she was on her knees before a swaying figure in the big rocker. Arms were outstretched, silver and gold hair mingled, sobs, hysterical laughter, broken articulations scattered like blown petals, — and then came a great, soul-satisfying silence, with two women rocking and clinging together as if they would never part. Strange lumps rose in Van's stiff throat. He moved away to the farthest window.

Truth was patting her grandmother's face.

"Mummie! mummie! Is it really you?" Another clasp and burst of sobs. "And to think you were here all the time, and I didn't know it! Oh, it *can't* be true! It's too good! I'm just *dreamin'*!"

Mrs. Dexter was quieter, but tears poured over her cheeks like a rivulet in sunshine.

"My baby!" she whispered, kissing the hot, moist brow. "My own little Truthie!"

"How did you ever come?" cried the girl with wide-open eyes, sitting backward on the floor only to hurl herself forward anew for more frantic embraces.

"I can't believe it yet! It's too good! Oh, mummie, is n't God good to us?"

Still on her knees she began to look about the room. "Why, here are lots of your own things!" she cried. "Here is your little work-table with all my old, naughty scratches on it, and your footstool, and your chair, — that means you are going to live here with me forever and ever. Don't it?" Her voice was that of an ecstatic child. Mrs. Dexter could not check her rapture.

"There is one thing that you have not seen, darling," the old lady whispered. "Look over the mantelpiece. The picture —"

Truth gave a cry. "Daddy, my own dear daddy! Oh, his dear, dear face!" She broke into a summer shower of tears, and threw herself into Mrs. Dexter's arms. "Do you believe he is with us now, mummie?"

"I do," said the widow, reverently.

Laughter broke through Truth's bright tears. "I tell you, I don't dare to look away from anything for a minute, for fear it will be gone! I wish I was all eyes, like a peacock!"

"I can hardly believe it all myself," said the old lady. "Do you realize, Truth, who prepared this surprise for us?"

Truth glanced at Van's averted figure, as if, indeed, she were waking. He did not turn. Probably he had not heard.

Truth's thin nostrils dilated as she formed her purpose.

"Yes, it was entirely his plan, his loving plan," Mrs. Dexter went on in a voice so low that it was a whisper. "He even came down South for me. No son could have been more thoughtful and tender."

Truth rose slowly and soberly to her feet, gave the disarranged travelling hat an instinctive jerk into place and stood for a moment panting, with wide eyes riveted on her husband's profile.

His attitude expressed loneliness and dejection. Perhaps even then he was thinking, "I am nothing to them, — these selfish women. I have worked and planned for them, and now they forget me!"

The last barrier fell with a crash. A little audible gasp, a soft impetuous rush, — and she was upon him. Her strong young arms were about his neck, her innocent lips sought his, as she cried: —

"Oh, I thank you, I thank you, my dear, dear husband! I shall love you all my life for this!" It was the first kiss she had given of her own accord. Craighead felt it a thing of fire and dew, — but it was the fire that caught his veins.

The canary sprang to his loop and sang with an obsession of rapture; and the sunlight made a golden halo where Mrs. Dexter bowed her head and wept.

CHAPTER XX

SUNSHINE

THE flow of real events seldom conforms to those riverbeds of apprehension or of hope that we have dugged for ourselves. A man prepares for sunshine, and storm arises; for storm, and the clouds fade of themselves. Van had thought the last boon possible to him a harmonious, peaceful, and contented home life, yet here he was in the very midst of it, like a tired wayfarer who has dreamed of deserts, and wakes to find himself in a spring meadow.

Few men, indeed, could have resisted the sweet, combined influence of Mrs. Dexter and Truth. Sometimes a very small spray of jasmine will flood a whole room with perfume; so was it with the fragrance of Mrs. Dexter's pure, chastened spirit.

Orchid, as Norton had predicted, was spending her autumn abroad. The society papers announced, now and again, the presence of herself and Tom at some great English country-house. Lord Gayrock was nearly always of the party. Truth never read one of these flattering notices without a throb of thankfulness and self-congratulation. Perhaps she thought that such triumphs might keep the much-courted lady abroad.

Before leaving for England, Mrs. Wiley had made no attempt to see Craighead, or even to write to him; but on the day of sailing, a great bunch of white orchids had been found lying on his desk, their clusters cunningly interwoven with delicate seaweed. When Norton entered the office a few moments later, they had disappeared.

As to Truth's own emotions at this time, it must be admitted that the little bride, being young, still immature, and very imaginative, felt at times something resembling terror, simply because she was so happy; and it is not to be wondered at that she did more than a few secret, unconventional acts in the way of charity, self-accusation, and prayer. Yet underlying all was a feeling of impermanency, which, perhaps, enhanced the preciousness of each passing day.

Craighead's new intellectual interest was a book on the Future of International Relations. He considered it the main achievement of his career, the outcome of many years of thought and speculation. His recent studies of Continental diplomacy and economy had been as sparks to the tinder of his convictions. This was to be a book which, beyond doubt, would make older statesmen wince, and the Continental nations hang their constitutions out to dry.

Somewhat to his surprise, and her own also, Truth gradually came to fill the place of amanuensis, confidant, and literary adviser. Intellectually the main issues were beyond her grasp, but no fellow-worker ever gave more patient and untiring assistance. Little by little Van had brought up manuscript, note-books, and reference books from his office to the suite, until finally it became necessary to transform one end of his former bedroom (now used as a dressing-room) into a sort of secondary office and library.

A new desk was bought. "Much too fancy for a man!" Van had laughed, on first seeing it. A pretty, open book-case found a place near by. Van groaned inwardly, but said nothing, when Truth covered all the entrancing, battered books with a curtain of Oriental silk. The sanctuary of this room the housemaid was forbidden to enter. Truth's delight was to keep each trinket and ornament in a state of shining neatness, and to see that the bunch of violets in the thin-stemmed glass was never

allowed to wither. She covered the desk with costly paper-knives, inkstands, sealing-wax outfits, sponge-holders, and pen-trays, until Van implored her to desist, else he would begin to think himself a bargain-counter rather than an author.

Sometimes in moving about the study on her housewifely rounds, Truth would fall idle and set to dreaming; would gaze out into the brightness of her future, — not thinking, but brooding in that universal silence which lies below all thought and all happiness. Van had placed her Parisian portrait on his desk. The sight of it there always brought to her a thrill of delight. At her insistent request he had several studies of his own head made. These now appeared in every room, and in a variety of frames each more gorgeous than the last.

Mrs. Dexter, too, seemed contented, and even happy, but with that sweet, unselfish, transfiguring happiness of resignation that is as different from youth's joy as is a moonlit mist to the golden glory of a summer noon. Her still delicate health was the obvious excuse for many social "regrets" that might otherwise have given offence. She kept to her old habits of early rising and retiring, spending the first hours of morning in tending her bird and her window-plants, or gazing out on the pink fog hanging above the Fens.

Truth had given up some of her classes, but still attended lectures, and a school of physical culture. The latter was Mrs. Dexter's horror.

"How *can* well brought up young women so demean themselves?" she once exclaimed, as Truth rushed in, panting and moist.

"But, grandma, you know it's good for one's health."

"That may be," conceded the old lady, "but violent exercise is always unbecoming, and should, at least, be done in private. Perspiration is exceedingly plebeian!"

"But, grandma, — even you used to walk about with

plates and things on your head and boards through your elbow."

"Only in private, my dear. That makes all the difference!"

Some of the topics of conversation most affected by their fashionable lady acquaintances were a source of tribulation to the old-fashioned Southerner. On one occasion a heavy-faced, well-meaning young matron attempted to give the outline of a clinical lecture she had just attended. In the midst of it Mrs. Dexter rose, white and trembling, and left the room. With the sound of the guest's retreating footsteps she entered again, more angry and excited than Truth had ever seen her.

"Truth Dexter! How does such a woman *dare* to call at this house?"

"Why, grandma!" protested Truth. "That's Mrs. Eben Bean Fadder of Commonwealth Avenue. She's a tremendous swell."

"She may be called a swell here," said Mrs. Dexter firmly, "if by 'swell' you mean a person of family, — but her proper place is in the slaughter-house."

"But they all talk that way," insisted Truth, — "even my dear Mrs. Adams."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Mrs. Dexter, the anger on her face giving way to sorrow, "I fear it is so. I recollect, the other day she went into most unnecessary detail over a slight attack of illness from which the Judge was suffering."

"I think it horrid myself," volunteered Truth; "but I hear it so much that I am getting used to it."

Mrs. Dexter was roused again. "*Don't* get used to it! Don't get used to it, I entreat you. The influence of one truly decent and refined lady may accomplish much. Really it is a matter which the clergy should take up. It is not that I fail to appreciate the privilege of healing, or the blessing even of surgery," she shuddered. "I have dressed many a soldier's wounds with my own hands,

and before the war,—on my plantation,—there was not a death or birth at which I was not present. I am not ignorant of the use of medicines nor of terrible forms of disease, but it seems incredible to me that such subjects should enter into the conversation of ladies.”

Yet, in spite of provincial differences, a very sincere affection had sprung up between Mrs. Dexter and Mrs. Adams. The deep interest of the latter in Truth would have been a sufficient bond in itself. Mrs. Dexter never wearied of hearing her darling praised. “Breeding will tell!” she had exclaimed more than once, and then colored faintly, and apologized, thinking that she had been betrayed into vulgar boastfulness. She could not speak so freely to Van as to this new friend, and accounts of Truth’s naïve speeches during her European trip were reciprocated by many charming tales of the young wife’s childhood, treasured in Mrs. Dexter’s loving heart, like pressed flowers in a Bible.

During the mornings, when Van was absent for his regular law-business, which for the present he had no intention of giving up, Truth went on with her special studies in history, languages, and literature. The Continental trip had imparted a new and more intelligent eagerness to her acquisitive mind, and there was no range of human experience into which she did not feel it necessary to delve. Van himself directed her reading toward books of information upon that topic of growing interest—the Far East. She had met some of those most diligent, polite, and attractive little students, the Japanese, at Harvard.

Van took her more frequently than before out upon long sleigh-rides through the keen, cold air, far out beyond Chestnut Hill for miles through Boston’s circle of clinging parks, Newton, Jamaica Plain, Dedham, and Milton, embracing the lofty ledges of the Blue Hills, and the heights of Dorchester where Washington had erected his decisive batteries. Mrs. Dexter thought her-

self too feeble to endure the unaccustomed exposure. But Truth felt new life tingle in her veins as she and her husband sped along the shining slippery roads, the black span under Van's masterly control gradually passing every rival equipage, and the keen sleigh rails throwing showers of hardened snow into the air at every turn or swerve; and she would come back home to greet her delighted "Mummie" with flashing eyes, and cheeks that glowed like a rose at sunrise.

In the evening, also, Craighead thought it best occasionally to knock off work, and take Truth to an Irving pageant, or to a Wagnerian opera in the improvised auditorium of the old Mechanics Building. Truth liked Lohengrin the best. Its poetical, chivalric legend, and brilliant mediæval setting, even the bitter sorrow that cut across its morning of joy, seemed to stir answering chords deep in her own nature. It was Van that she always saw, rather than De Reszke, in the dazzling, silver armor; and she would nestle against him, or even cling to his arm, as if the fateful intriguers were about to tear him away.

Norton came and went like a member of the family. Mrs. Dexter loved him from the first. She declared that he was just like Truth, that he was the image of Truth's father who had died when just about the same age. On hearing this, Truth, who had not the faintest suspicion of the boy's real feelings toward her, laughed merrily, and said that she should adopt him at once.

Old Craighead, too, came often; much oftener, in fact, than one member of the little group could have wished. Mrs. Dexter, strive and pray as she might, could not overcome her abhorrence to the hard old New England face and nature. But Truth had developed a genuine affection for the lonely old man.

"He's just like one of our Southern 'scaly-barks,'" she said once to Van. "Awfully rough and crusty to look at, but not so hard to crack, after all."

"And once cracked?" said Van, smiling.

Truth tilted her head and looked at him with eyes that sparkled.

"Did you ever eat a scaly-bark?"

"I never did."

"Well, then, — words can't express it. You must wait. Only it's the sweetest nut that ever grew on a tree."

Incredible as it may seem, she had reached a point of intimacy with her one parent-in-law where she could safely venture to tease him with his pet prejudices.

"What right had you old plebeian Yankees to come interfering with us aristocrats, anyway?" she would ask, with a haughtiness that was not all assumed. Once, when she had been unusually extravagant, he roused himself to deal her a mighty blow.

"Now, look-a-here, Trewth! I never thought to say it to my own darter-in-law, — but it appears to me that you ain't much better than a rebel!"

"Better than a rebel!" echoed the undaunted one. "Why, who wants to be better than a rebel? Everybody in the South is one at heart, — that is to say" — with a defiant toss of her head, "everybody who is anybody!"

Though the days were full of quiet sunshine, it was the evening routine that Truth loved best. Then it was that, if no unavoidable concert, opera, or dinner interfered, she sat in the little library beside her husband, and helped him write his big book. Her place was on a low stool betwixt him and the book-shelves. By this time she knew the ponderous tomes by heart, the law-reports, encyclopædias, statistics, bound reviews, and all, and could look up a reference more quickly than Van himself.

To many a writer it becomes almost a necessity to read aloud a newly written chapter or paragraph while he still glows and tingles with its power. So Van read

aloud each step of progress, and Truth listened with ears and eyes and parted lips, winking a little over the hard words, but aching with pride in the sonorous dignity of the long, powerful sentences. That upraised look of adoration sometimes smote Van as with a blow.

One evening in early February they had been working until an unusually late hour. The familiar sounds of hotel life, the roar and tinkle in the streets below, had ceased, but instead, the tumult of a storm arose. The day had been bleak, and gray, and dusty. Now the sea had sent in her legions of over-charged clouds, and battle waged fiercer than before. Sleet began to hiss at the window-panes, and the gusts of wind stumbled and strode over the tall house-tops, until the electric-lights within shivered and blinked. Truth had looked up references until back and eyes and brain ached. As Van jotted down the last, she gave a sigh of relief, and, before he could rise from the desk, had drawn her little stool to his knee. Shyly, as was her wont in all caresses, she took one of his hands in both her own, and leaned her head against him.

"Good little girl!" he said, and patted the blond hair. She pulled his left arm down until it encircled her, and leaned closer. So they remained for some moments in silence, listening to the rush and snap and bluster of winds.

"It sounds just as if a great big housemaid were leaning out of heaven to flap her dust-cloth," said Truth.

"Do you ever have such storms in the South?"

"Sometimes, but not often. How cruel sleet is,—it comes down like little knives, cutting and piercing all living things."

Another silence followed. Neither moved. Then Truth went on dreamily: "At home, now, the narcissus and daffodils are just coming up. I know exactly where to look for each one. I almost *feel* them under the earth,

and it's hardly a surprise when I see the first little pair of green hands coming through."

Van smiled kindly, and patted her shoulder.

"They always seemed to me to come up praying, the hands pressed so close together, — just so. And then afterward comes the prayer, turned into flowers. Oh, Van!" she cried suddenly, wheeling about to throw both arms around him, "can't we *ever* have a house of our own up here, out in Brookline, or Milton, or somewhere? Even if it's only a little one-story house, I don't care, just so I can have a garden to plant things in, and watch for them year after year. After a while they get to knowing you and watching for you, too. Oh, you needn't laugh! Wordsworth said that flowers had souls, and he ought to know!"

"I am not laughing, I assure you. Tell me more about them."

"Don't you know anything about plants and flowers?"

Van shook his head. "Not much! Father used to make me work up the 'garden sass,' as he called it. It was the job I hated most."

"How funny!" mused the other, "and I love even weeds so, that I always beg them to forgive me for pulling them up."

"Well, little girl! do you realize that it is after midnight?"

"Oh, not *quite* yet," she pleaded. "You didn't say anything about a house in the suburbs."

Van slipped his arm away very gently, and rose to his feet. "You know I had to sign the lease for these rooms until the first of November next. Can't the question wait until then?"

Truth did not reply, and Van, after a moment, went into the bedroom alone, but Truth sat on, dreaming.

March came in, and still Mrs. Wiley was abroad. Her photographs, it was said, were making the fortunes of

London shop-keepers; the Prince of Wales had desired to meet her, though the meeting never came off, owing to the impertinent and unaccountable interference of Mr. Wiley; duchesses and actresses copied her gowns, — what more could a woman desire? A magnificent picture of her came to the firm of Craighead and Norton, directed to the junior partner. "Of course she meant it for you, old sport," Norton had said jovially, as he propped it up against a cigar-stand, "only she didn't quite dare to put on the true address."

"This is no place for a lady's picture," said Van gruffly, by way of answer. "Griggs will be in in a moment." Griggs was the office boy.

"Well," protested Norton, "if every haberdasher shop in Fleet Street can have one in the window, I guess I can give myself the treat here. If it's too bright for you, I'll get you a pair of smoked glasses."

Craighead had turned to his work without another word, and Norton, after studying the face of his senior for a while, took the picture down and tossed it into a drawer.

In the little Hanover suite, sunshine, for some reason, was beginning to fade. With the lengthening of the March days an abstraction, verging at times upon melancholy, gained possession of Mrs. Dexter. She never stirred from the house, fearing the damp spring mists and winds more than the clear, dry cold of winter. She would sit by the window motionless for hours at a time, starting guiltily if Truth entered. Her bird and flowers had grown to be a burden rather than a delight, and her appetite became so poor that Van, in much concern, proposed to Truth that they should call a physician. But Truth smiled up at him with the sweet child-look in her face. "Doctors can't help her," she said. "Can't you see it's just homesickness?"

One evening the old lady had been sitting for nearly two hours, speechless and motionless, before her bed-

room fire. The usual hour for retiring was long past. Truth, at work in the library with Van, crept to the door now and then to be ready for the good-night kiss and blessing. When ten o'clock had come and gone, she pushed aside her heavy books, and told Van that she would have to stop long enough to 'wake grandma, so she could go to sleep.

The old lady was deaf to the light step, and gave a start as Truth slipped down to the rug at her feet. Her bright head was on her grandmother's shoulder. After a moment she said: —

"How pretty the birch-logs are! But, after all, they are not pine-knots, are they? And they don't smell like home."

"No, indeed they don't," said the old lady with a sigh.

"I wonder if Uncle Norah has been out on the hillside for logs to-day, with Moses, and the old blue cart."

Mrs. Dexter did not respond, but in a moment Truth saw something small and bright gleam out in the firelight and vanish. It was a tear.

"Mummie! You're just *dyin'* of homesickness, and I know it! Now tell me honest, — ain't you?"

"I'm afraid I am," faltered the sweet voice. "I have tried not to betray it, fearing that I would give you pain. But it is no use, Truth. A young sapling like you can be transplanted, but not an old tree like me, with the gray moss of memory hanging from its limbs. I think I could go back alone. I have never greeted a spring away from the old place, and it seems, almost, as if — he —" she glanced at the beloved pictured face on the wall — "were calling me to come. If dear Van could make the arrangements without *too* much trouble —"

"Yes, yes, you shall go," said Truth with decision. "I know the feeling myself. It's like an underground root tugging at a plant far away. I wake up in the night sometimes, thinking that I am at home, and of all the

things I am going to do during the day, — then I hear an electric car, or the telephone bell down in the office, and know all at once that I am in Boston. I wish I could go with you — only — Van —” Her cheeks flushed, and she hid them against the old lady’s arm.

“No, he is too busy to come, and you could not leave him. Maybe he will bring you down later.”

“I must get back to the work,” said Truth, rising to her feet. “It is high time that mummies were in bed!”

“Yes, yes; at once.” She spoke with a certain nervous eagerness. “But, Truth. Stop a moment, — don’t you think it would be better to broach the subject to-night? There is no need of postponement!”

Truth smiled, but tears sprang to her eyes. “Are you in such a big hurry to leave us? There! Never mind! I didn’t mean it, — I take it back. Don’t look hurt!”

Van consented, of course, though he declared that the sweetest influence of their home-life would go with Mrs. Dexter. “Would n’t you like to accompany her, Truth?” he asked generously. He smiled brightly, expecting to receive an answering smile of gratitude for his thoughtfulness, and was astounded to meet two dark, reproachful eyes.

“Why, don’t you want to go with your mummie?”

“Of course,” answered Truth, trying to swallow an inconvenient lump. “She knows that I want to go with her, only I thought that — maybe — you would n’t want me to.”

“And indeed I don’t!” he cried heartily. “I was nerving myself up to a piece of sheer self-sacrifice.”

Truth was not satisfied. “If you *can* do just as well without me —” she was beginning.

“I can do whatever is best for you and grandma,” interrupted he. “You could n’t want anything fairer than that, could you?”

“No-o-o,” said Truth, doubtfully. She resumed her seat

with a sigh, and picked up the heavy tome. "Let me see, — we were just at that fourth section of the Tariff Law, weren't we?"

Mrs. Dexter was to leave the last week in March. The date once fixed, all the old cheerfulness returned, and again she moved about the pretty room with a smile on her lips, and low songs of gladness in her heart. More than once she attempted to hide these signs of joy from her "children," but less profound students of human nature might well have detected the loving subterfuge.

A few mornings after the decision, Mrs. Dexter beckoned Van to her room with an air of mystery. As he entered she shut the door softly, and turned the key. Craighead felt a little uncomfortable.

"Sit down," fluttered his hostess. "I won't keep you but a minute. I want to consult you about Truth's birthday. You know it is to-morrow."

Craighead looked guilty. He had never considered the possibility that Truth might have birthdays.

"This is what I've got for her," went on Mrs. Dexter, confidentially, as she put into his hands a little jeweller's package. "See if you think she'll like it."

Van examined the dainty pair of "stick-pins," and said, a little awkwardly: "I don't know much about women's things. These seem to me all right. What had I better get?"

"Oh, any little trinket, or book, or even a pot of growing flowers. She will be more pleased with the thought than the present."

"I'll stop at Crowell's on the way down," said Van, rising.

He did so, and was scowling into a tray of ornaments, when a sort of shiver of premonition passed over him, and, turning, he faced Orchid Wiley.

"You!" he said, "*You!*" He whitened until Orchid herself was embarrassed.

"Yes, I! Don't look so frightened, the clerk might see! I'm not a ghost!"

Indeed she was not, but a most entrancing vision of flesh and blood.

"When did you come? I had not heard that you were to sail."

"It was all very unexpected," she said prettily. Her ease of manner was for the benefit of the clerk. "Tom had one of his bad attacks of the heart, and the physicians ordered a sea-voyage. Naturally, the voyage I chose was that which would bring me home. We arrived only yesterday."

"And Tom! How is he now?"

"He is entirely recovered for the present, though these attacks are becoming alarmingly frequent. The clerk is trying to catch your eye."

"Yes, I'll take that one," said Van, desperately. "That red one. Put it in a box."

The clerk grinned broadly as he placed a hideous pearl and ruby ring, the size for a child, in a purple velvet box.

Orchid waited until the tiny parcel had been delivered, and then turned and walked down the aisle, Van following. Her coupé was at the door. "May I drive you to your office?" she asked.

"No. I must get fresh air. Why did you come?"

"A flattering question," she remarked, and drooped her head. In an instant he had touched his hat and was gone. She looked after his tall form for a moment, then got into her carriage. "Where?" she answered, to the footman's respectful inquiry. "Oh, anywhere! Out to the Fens."

Truth was very happy on her birthday. She wore the pretty stick-pins in the lace at her throat, and managed, with difficulty, to squeeze the ring on her little finger for the day.

"But I don't mind its being too little," she had declared, on receiving it. "I shall never wear any ring regularly but my wedding ring, and that was put on a month too late." She laughed brightly. "What I shall always love about this is that Van thought about my birthday and bought me a present all by himself!"

CHAPTER XXI

LILITH

"You know the Wileys are back," began Norton, tentatively.

"Yes, I know it. I met Mrs. Wiley in the street yesterday, and this morning ran in for a hand-shake with Tom. He looks pretty seedy after his London experiences, though the real season had not begun, he tells me."

Norton looked relieved at the candor of his friend's tone.

"I have n't seen Tom, but the Orchid is more dazzling than ever, confound her! — with a new Parisian gown for every hour in the week."

Van did not pursue the topic, but Norton, after a moment's restlessness, went on: "I met her at Mrs. Tooter's yesterday. All the other women were bilious with envy. We had quite a talk." Norton's manner implied that there were revelations to come.

"Was the conversation important?"

"Naturally, — being about you. She had a hundred and one questions to ask."

Van did not look up.

"Van!" cried the junior, impulsively, "I don't think that Orchid is a friend to Mrs. Craighead."

"No, I do not think she is."

Norton's brows knit. He knew what such an admission must mean to one of Craighead's stubborn pride.

"Shall I speak of it a little further?"

Craighead nodded.

"Well, she tries to give the impression that your marriage was merely for money and — pique. It makes my blood boil! Is there no way to shut her up?"

"Was there ever a way of shutting any woman up?" responded Craighead, bitterly.

Norton mused. "It really would seem as if she had had enough already, with all London running after her, and Boston to boot. Yet she can't forgive you for getting married. I knew there was going to be trouble when she came after you that first morning. She had green lights in her eyes. But that's always the way. The only thing we want very badly is the one that is out of our reach." The young philosopher sighed, as he lighted a cigarette, and threw one foot up to his desk.

"Do you think she has made up her mind to a definite attack on Truth?"

"It looks jolly like it! Of course no one can be sure what a woman is after. They always fire their guns at the wrong end. But I fear that this one means to be nasty. She was keen on hearing what other people thought and said of Mrs. Craighead, nodding and grinning like all possessed over the compliments, and looking like her own funeral over the others. There were not many of the others, but I mixed in a few to try the effect."

Craighead gave one of his rare, brilliant smiles. "You'll be a judge yet, Quin. Now what can we do to protect Truth?"

"Oh, Orchid can't really do anything beyond poisoning a few social arrows. Everybody will see that it is jealousy. You've got too long a head to have given such a woman any real weapon. If only — I say, Van!" he wheeled around, with his bright, frank young eyes squarely on his partner. "Why in the d — did you ever go to Ponkatuck last summer? That is the only mistake I ever knew you to make."

Van flushed. "Tom and Lord Gayrock were there. I went to see Gayrock."

"I may believe that, but the gossips won't. What does Mrs. Craighead think of the visit?"

"She does n't know of it."

"Wh-e-w!" Norton was beginning, when the other cut him short.

"You are a good chap, Quin, and I know you will do all you can, but it is a delicate matter. I guess you had better keep out of it."

"As you choose," said Norton, dryly. "Fine day we're having!"

At the Hanover Mrs. Dexter and Truth were engrossed with preparations for the former's departure. The most important of these was the selection of presents to take home, — Bibles, toys, shawls, blankets, "dress-patterns," China, chair-tidies, and ornaments sufficient to gladden the hearts and enrich the family traditions of a dozen Dextervilles. "I never knew before how nice it was to be rich," Truth had exclaimed more than once, as she unwrapped and packed away some treasure. Uncle Norah's present was to be nothing less than a gold watch and chain. "He'll never be got to put the watch in his pocket," Truth laughed.

The day of departure was set for Tuesday. The previous Friday morning Truth had occasion to run down town on a hasty errand. Returning about ten o'clock she had left the street-cars, and was about to enter the Hanover, when she heard a merry voice at her heels: — "Stop a moment, can't you? I'm all out of breath!"

Truth's heart sank. She had not even heard that Orchid was back.

"What luck to have caught you, 'on the fly,' as it were! I have come to have a little chat."

"I-'m — I-'m — very busy just now," Truth stammered. "Grandma is going down South in a few days, and I am helping her pack."

"Surely she can spare you for half an hour! I have n't waited for you to call, as you see, although I've been abroad so long."

"It was very kind of you, indeed," said Truth. "And next week —"

"I'm not to be got rid of so easily," cried Orchid, gayly. "You are too difficult to catch at home! And how do I know that you are not about to run off to the South yourself?"

"No, really I am not," said Truth, quickly. "I would like to go, but Mr. Craighead cannot spare me."

"Indeed, is it so? How charming! Yet sometimes it is the unexpected that happens."

Truth bore a heavy heart along the palm-fringed corridors. The unwelcomed visitor chatted unceasingly. "How lovely your rooms are now!" she cried, as they crossed the threshold. "And what exquisite roses! La Frances were always such favorites of mine!" She rustled across the room to a great bunch of Duchesse de Brabant roses.

Truth's heart sank lower and lower. "Perhaps grandma will be able to see you for a little while," she said, moving toward the door.

"No — no," entreated Orchid. "To be frank, I did not come to see her at all. I have not asked for her, you know. Let us sit here by this cosey fire and have a little chat."

Without waiting for an invitation she drew forward an easy-chair, unbuttoned her furs, and thrust her dainty feet forward to the blaze.

Truth watched her in silence. She was fighting down something that strongly resembled fear. Why was it that this woman alone had power to make her cower and wince as from an impending blow? Her new ease of manner, her small amount of self-confidence, her very happiness, seemed to be shrivelling away, leaving exposed the ignorant, shy rustic from Alabama.

Meanwhile Orchid was nestling contentedly into her chair, and observing, through half-shut eyes, the room and its mistress.

Truth drew nearer the fireplace; Orchid lifted her head, and all at once seemed to become aware of a large, new photograph of Van that stood in the centre of the mantel-shelf. Her eyes dilated. The look went through Truth like a shiver in glass.

"What a superb picture of Van!" exclaimed the guest. "None I have is so good."

"It is his last one," said Truth, with some significance in her tone.

"And being a respectable young married man, he is not at liberty to give them away wherever he listeth," laughed Orchid, good-naturedly.

Truth colored angrily, but did not attempt to reply.

"It's only a joke, *ma chérie*," said the other. "I was always given to teasing. Tell me of your grandmother's trip; is she to leave you for an indefinite time?"

"I fear so. She cannot stand Boston, — the climate."

"Or the people?"

"We have some dearly loved friends in Boston," said Truth, stiffly.

"You will miss her dreadfully, I presume. She must have been much company for you."

"Yes, I shall miss her. But my time is very full."

"Have you caught the fever so soon?" cried Orchid. "The Boston microbe is energy! May I ask what form the disease takes with you?"

Truth smiled faintly. "I shall have classes and courses in reading, — then, besides, I am helping Mr. Craighead."

"Helping Mr. Craighead? Helping Van? In what, pray? Or," — here she dropped her eyes with an affectation of embarrassment, — "am I too inquisitive?"

"I am helping him write a book," said Truth, curtly.

"A book! How jolly! I had n't heard. A novel, of course."

"It is not a novel," said Truth, indignantly. "It is 'A History of Diplomacy and Trade in the Nineteenth Century and A Forecast of International Relations.'"

Orchid's face remained preternaturally grave for an instant; then her mouth began to twitch, her slight figure to tremble, and all at once she went off into peal after peal of laughter. Truth colored again. She drew her thick brows together, and gazed sternly at her convulsed visitor; but Orchid was beyond self-control.

"Shall I get you a glass of wine, or summon a servant?" asked Truth. No answer was given, only the desperate spasms and contortions of uncontrolled mirth. Truth seated herself on the very edge of a chair and waited until the paroxysm should have passed.

Orchid recovered power of speech in unequal gasps. "Ex-cuse me, dear," she faltered, and wiped away the tears; "I know that it was unpardonable! You will never forgive me! But oh! it *did* sound so — so — supremely — fun-ny!" Here the attack threatened renewal.

Truth's brows were dark. "Perhaps it amuses you to think of my being connected with such a deep book, Mrs. Wiley. Let me assure you that the help I am permitted to give is of the humblest kind. I merely look up references, and copy out paragraphs, but it is the greatest pleasure I have, and is, I think, of some assistance to my husband."

"Oh, I do not doubt it, — not for an instant!" cried the other, penitently. "A delightful conjugal rhapsody of intellectuality! All the same Van is missing his vocation. Van should write a novel, — and in collaboration with — me!"

Truth remained perfectly silent. She was waiting for the echoes of that name "Van," as pronounced by the woman before her, to pass away from her tortured ears. The sound of it was a deliberate taunt. There was a sort of languorous drawl, a memory, a caress. It had the

flavor of a fragrant past. Then she rose slowly to her feet, and walked across the hearth-rug to her visitor. She was conscious of an impassioned prayer for self-control. Strength came, and she looked down calmly and steadily into the mocking, upturned face. "Mrs. Wiley," she began, in her soft, high-bred voice, "if you desire to be my friend, you must not speak in this way of my husband. It will be best for us to agree never to bring his name into our conversations."

Orchid lifted eyebrows and shoulders in exaggerated astonishment. Her smile deepened. But Truth went on bravely:—

"I know that he was your friend in the past, long before he was my husband. But he *is* my husband now — and — I love him!"

Orchid's smile vanished; the defiant pink began to ebb from her cheeks, and her eyes to grow a little less hard and bright. But Truth, now that her small supplication was at an end, felt shyness; awkwardness and terror began a battle for the possession of her soul. She trembled from head to foot, and, to steady herself, threw one hand out toward the mantel. In doing so her eye caught Van's pictured face. He seemed to smile strength. Scarcely knowing what she did she snatched the picture from its place, and pressed her lips upon it. The move was an unfortunate one. Orchid's spine stiffened.

"And what is your reason for this extraordinary dictum?"

"There is no other reason, — only that he is my husband, and I love him."

"And what if I, too, — love him?"

Truth shivered and closed her eyes. It had come, at last! She felt as though a clenched fist had struck full upon her physical heart. The whole import of the low, whispered words could not find place in her consciousness all at once, but now the meaning, the meanings, began to come in throbs and spasms of reactive agony. The fact

that Orchid was a married woman smote her with a sense of personal shame.

"Well!" came the defiant voice. "What have you to say?"

"Nothing," said Truth, brokenly.

"You are shocked, doubtless."

"I am ashamed."

"Oh, these spotless, proud Southern aristocrats! I have met others of your countrywomen not so squeamish!"

"Will you excuse me now, Mrs. Wiley?"

"Do you turn me out?" cried the other, angrily. "There are a few things yet to be said."

"You may be shameless, but are you pitiless as well?" cried Truth, with a flash of spirit. "I tell you that I will hear nothing from your lips. If there is anything to be told, I will hear it from my husband, or no one."

Orchid rose to her feet, and began fastening her wraps. "He would be the last to speak, my dear, although it is principally for his benefit that you should be enlightened. You are making him, as well as yourself, the laughing-stock of Boston, with this ridiculous affectation of felicity. Your fantastic marriage —"

"Will you be silent!" said Truth in a low, dangerous tone. Her great eyes were those of a trapped lion. The dauntless Orchid drew back a step.

"You little fool!" she hissed. "I came to help you and him. You must hear the truth sooner or later. Ask Mrs. Adams why he married you! Ask Norton! Ask Van himself!"

Truth's calmness seemed to return. "What have I ever done to you that you should hate me like this? You have a husband of your own, beauty, wealth, social position, — everything, yet you take the trouble to come here and torture me. My husband's affairs cannot concern you now. If you ever had a claim upon him, it is over and done with, — it is in the past."

"Last summer, at Ponkatuck, was not so very far in the past."

"Ponkatuck!" echoed Truth. The name had an ominous sound.

"Then he hasn't dared tell you!" cried Orchid. The triumph on her face was unmistakable.

Truth threw out both hands as if to keep her enemy at bay. "I don't want to hear! I *won't* hear!"

Orchid's face was one victorious sneer. She turned to leave. "You have brought this on yourself by your insolence," she said brutally. "Ask Van — whom you trust so implicitly — about the letter on the beach and the *kiss*!"

The door closed softly. Truth stood counting the merry little heel-taps as they pattered down the corridor. When Mrs. Dexter entered, a few moments later, she found the young wife still motionless in the centre of the room, with a face that seemed to look on death.

The old lady strove to conceal her alarm. "Are you feeling sick, dearie? You look tired. Who was the guest that just went out?"

"I've got a very bad headache, mummie," said Truth, then roused herself slowly and stared around the room. "I have not felt well for several weeks, but this morning the pain came on suddenly. Please don't tell — Van, that it hurts so much, or that any caller was here. It will get well soon. Only I must be quiet and alone all the rest of the day. Will you see that nobody disturbs me? — not even him."

"Of course, my darling *child*! But you ought to take something, some bromide, or anti-kamnia. Don't you want mummie to rub your head?"

Truth shook her aching head.

"And it came on just this morning?"

Truth looked around the room again as if to be sure that it was empty, then she walked unsteadily toward her bed-

room door. All at once she became conscious of her grandmother's last question.

"Yes, oh, yes! It seemed to come on just this morning. But," here she gave a smile of tremulous and infinite pathos, "now I know that it has been there all the time."

CHAPTER XXII

THE SCOURGE

TRUTH was allowed to remain in her bedroom during that dreadful afternoon and night undisturbed, except when, at long intervals, Mrs. Dexter would creep to the door to ask whether anything could be done, or to suggest anew the summoning of a physician. Van came once, once only; and then Truth lay in stricken silence, thought and feeling suspended, until he should have turned from the door, his low questions unanswered.

"She must be asleep; she did not answer. Poor little girl! I wish she had let us send for a physician," he said to Mrs. Dexter. Truth heard the kind words and kinder tone, and poured them, as new grist for agony, into the busy mill of her thoughts.

Her suffering was of that poignant kind that comes to the young and inexperienced only. Old people realize from the first, with a sort of reluctant satisfaction, that the blackest crisis, once lived through, must get better instead of worse; but to the young, every grief swallows, at one gulp, all times, all pasts and futures. Death seemed the one solution, and hour after hour Truth lay face-down upon the bed, picturing to herself various probable consummations of her death and burial. Now she was Elaine, stretched upon a mediæval bier, with a modern Lancelot to cast before her bright jewel-tears of remorse; again, she was only a poor, starved, loving girl, dying at her betrayer's feet. Fragments of death-bed speeches floated through her mind, as tattered shreds of mist upon a stormy mountain. Letters of renunciation and

forgiveness were composed only to be flung aside for a more heartrending creation. Then the softer mood would pass, and she was a tormented human soul with the fox, jealousy, under her cloak of pride.

By nightfall she had convinced herself that she was an object of loathing to Van; that he had loved Orchid all along, and still loved her. Oh, the shame of that thought! But as for the motives in marriage at which Orchid hinted, that was still a mystery. It had certainly been a noble thing in him to assume the care of two helpless women, yet here she, Truth, was accused of making him a laughing-stock merely by loving him and being happy. Orchid had been married for years. If she had loved Van in the past, why did she ever marry Mr. Wiley? Truth felt that the situation was beyond her. Suddenly the name "blood-money!" clanged like a warning through her hollow fancies. She was living in luxury on the money of a traitor. The Colonel had died almost with a curse against it upon his lips. Blood-money! This must be the cause of it all, and she told herself the punishment was just. No wonder that the Boston people mocked and laughed to see two Southern ladies adorning themselves in traitor plumes and yet holding their heads high. This might explain the attitude of Boston, but was it sufficient reason, in itself, to excuse Van's visit to Ponkattuck and his silence concerning it? And the letter, — the kiss! A new flood of agony washed down the little heap of reason that she had been building. No, the mystery, the horror of it all, was beyond her.

But something must be done. She would ask some good friend to help her, — Mrs. Adams, the Judge, the Rector of her church, — Norton. Norton! Her heart stopped. She had spoken to him once before, long in the past. "I want to ask you whether you think that he — Mr. Craighead — has any enemies?" She had dreaded Mrs. Wiley even then. "Some people can't forgive their friends for being happy," Norton had replied.

"But if they ever trouble you, you just come to me and I'll settle them!" Yes, Norton was the one to whom she would go. He had always seemed to like her, and he was Van's friend, too. This decision brought such comfort that soon after she fell asleep.

The next morning broke in a scourge of wind and rain. Truth had two points clear in her mind,—first, that she would speak to Norton as soon as possible; and second, that she would not burden Mrs. Dexter with her anguish, but let the dear one start South with an untroubled heart. She was able to say good-morning calmly, and, in response to loving inquiries, state that, although the pain was not entirely gone, she was practically recovered from the attack.

At breakfast Van remarked, "I shall have to be prompt at the office this morning. Norton is in New York for a few days."

After breakfast Truth stood at her bedroom window looking out into the storm. It had all passed through her soul but a few hours before, and this was merely a visible manifestation. An irresistible longing came over her to go out and become part of it. Perhaps, in this way, her own dark moods might be clearer. The longing grew to a sort of madness. She hurried into wraps, waterproof, and snow-shoes, and announced to Mrs. Dexter that she was going out into the fresh air for an hour.

"Fresh air!" echoed Mrs. Dexter in consternation. "Why, this is a hurricane! You will catch your death! I can't let you go!"

"Oh, mummie, *don't* try to keep me! I must go. I *must*! Don't you remember how I always loved the wind at home? I need it now more than I ever did in all my life! Don't try to stop me,—there's a dear, good mummie! And I'll bring you a big bunch of violets." In another moment she was gone.

Mrs. Dexter sighed and resumed her work. Her

thoughts went back to Truth's childhood days, in which an almost savage love of the wind had been a marked characteristic. Often at the incoming of a summer storm she would disappear, to be found later at the very tip of some strong pine sapling, lashed about and swayed and tossed like a very Ariel of storms.

Truth, too, was thinking of the old days as she hurried out toward the Fens. "I wonder if I shall ever climb a tree again," she said to herself. Then, a moment later, "If I should try it now my heart would weigh down the tree before I got to the top."

The wind had grown higher, but the rain was almost gone. What little there was the wind dashed back into the face of heaven before it could touch the already sodden earth. The wind itself was in a mad witch-waltz,—a thing of changing shapes and moods and minds. At one moment it hid crouching and trembling among the soaked dead grasses of the Fens; at another it rose in almost visible curves, with human shrieks of excitement, then fell again in heavy, quivering viewlessness of bulk upon the wind-colored plain and river. At the brink of many Fen-pools small wedges of ice drifted together and gnawed incessantly at the stems of stark, brown reeds, with the sound of famished mice.

The little Fen-bridges cowered lower than usual, and were stooped, like despondent old men. Across the Charles River the long, dark span of Harvard Bridge, above its strung hemispheres of space, seemed to lift and fall with the gusts, as some huge reptile breathing in pain.

Truth drew her hood until the pale oval of her face alone was exposed. Frosty particles of moisture sparkled in her eyelashes, and the cold wind was like steel pressed against her lips and cheeks. It was blowing now with a steady pressure, so that she leaned against it as if it had been a hedge. Suddenly, with a hoarse burst of laughter, it fell back, almost throwing her to the ground.

She threw back her head and laughed defiance, at which challenge the wind grew wroth, and sent Deva kings from the four corners of space to do battle. Truth's longing for death was forgotten. The faint, slow pink came back to her cheeks and the brightness to her eyes. She was deaf and blind to all but the wind. For more than an hour the revel lasted, and then her adversary, as though physically tired, began to lag and whine. Truth turned homeward, a weeping Naiad no longer, but a Valkyrie. The strength of primeval freshness was in her heart.

Faithful to her promise of bringing violets to Mrs. Dexter, she turned into Beacon Street in search of a florist. She was so close to Mrs. Adams that a mischievous desire came upon her to run in and give that good friend a surprise. The effect was as she could have wished. Mrs. Adams threw up her plump hands in unbelief and horror, and began to hurl questions:—

"Lor', child! Where have you been?"

"Out on the Fens, having a bout with King Boreas."

"What makes your eyes so big and bright?"

"The better to see you, my dear!"

"But what makes your lips so red?"

"The better to kiss you, my dear!" Truth suited the action to the words.

"I believe you are the incarnation of a Valkyrie," said Mrs. Adams, as Truth threw aside the cloak and hood.

"Oh, it's done me good! It blows away the personality like thistle-down, and leaves only the seed-vessel of individuality! How's that for a metaphysical speech?"

Mrs. Adams laughed. "I wish it would come in and blow away some of these personalities from my table," she said.

Truth then noticed for the first time that her hostess was up to the elbows in envelopes and printed circulars.

"What is it? Your morning's mail?"

"No, alas! It is an extra club-meeting. I am secre-

tary, but intend to resign immediately. Women's clubs are a nuisance; they are always changing their minds!"

"Which of your many is it? Maybe I can stop long enough to help you direct envelopes."

"Ah, my child, if you only would! You are an angel of mercy! Which club, you say? It's the Cosmical."

Truth seated herself at the table. "I only hope I won't leave out the 's' and make it 'comical.'"

"One name would be quite as appropriate as the other! Oh, you *are* a dear to help me! I've got as far as the H's, — now begin. I'll call out. 'Mrs. J. Q. Arrowditch Higgle.'"

Truth stopped to laugh. "Oh, these Boston names!" she cried, "'J. Q.' is, of course, 'John Quincy,' or 'Josiah Quincy.' Arrowditch is, I believe, historical —"

"To be sure," said Mrs. Adams, gravely.

"And Higgle —"

"The less said about that, the better. The Higgles are great Commonwealth Avenue swells, now, as you know; but quite within the memory of living man, — and woman also, — old Mr. Higgle baked beans and sold them, Sundays, to the population of South Boston. Beans are not allowed in that household now, — *so* plebeian, you know!"

For about two hours the friends worked steadily, often, it is to be feared, beguiling the time with similar anecdotes. One envelope was left.

"The last!" cried Mrs. Adams, with a huge sigh of relief. "Ready? Well, then — 'Mrs. Thomas Courtney Wiley.'"

Truth wrote down the name in silence, and placed it neatly on the last heap. Then she asked, casually, "Mrs. Wiley belongs to a great many clubs, does n't she?"

"All of them! Every one of them! Sorosis, Cosmical, Walt Whitman, Browning, Art Students' League, Historical, Buddhist, Brahminical, Zoroaster, Folk-Lore, Metaphysical, Histrionic, and a dozen others! She be-

longs to them, indeed, but she only goes to those where men are apt to be present."

Truth said nothing. Mrs. Adams gave an apologetic little laugh.

"I know that sounded nasty, and I don't like to say spiteful things about my own sex; but that woman irritates me beyond all bounds. She eats, sleeps, and drinks vanity! She is insatiable! Why, last week, she nearly turned the head of the Judge himself! She is a menace to society, and, by the way, Truth, I fancy she is not a good friend of yours."

The wind died out above Truth's heart, leaving it a wide plain, sodden with tears.

"I have never done Mrs. Wiley any harm. Why should she dislike me?"

Mrs. Adams shook her head. "I fear she does. I am not at liberty to give my authority (it had been Quincy Norton), but I am convinced that she is as spiteful as a cat, where you are concerned."

Mrs. Adams began tying up the envelopes into packages. She was a little frightened at having, at last, broached the delicate subject. Truth sat perfectly calm and still, but a flood of thoughts was rushing through her brain. Here, indeed, was her opportunity for speaking. Mrs. Adams loved her, and would counsel her wisely, — would keep her from making herself ridiculous in the eyes of Boston. No one knew the social conditions better than Mrs. Adams; Norton was only a boy, after all, — yet it would have been easier to speak to Norton. Twice, — thrice, — Truth opened her lips, but each time that morbid delicacy in personal affairs which is the charm, and sometimes the misfortune, of most well-born Southern women, held back, as a stifling hand, the life-giving flow of confidence. After a long pause she said: —

"I have felt from the first that Mrs. Wiley disliked me, although she is always urging me to be intimate; but I had no way of finding out the reason of her prejudice."

The elder lady was deceived by Truth's composure. "Why, my dear! It's simple enough! She's piqued and jealous because Van married you."

"She had a husband."

"That does n't satisfy Orchid Wiley. She wants half the wealth and talent of Boston for playthings, and nothing infuriates her like the escape of a desirable victim."

"And was Mr. Craighead recognized as one of her victims?"

"Well, perhaps, not exactly a victim" (Mrs. Adams was in deeper waters than she had bargained for). "You know how it is! — or, rather, you *don't* know how it is, you refreshing innocent! As soon as Van began to be known and talked about, she made up to him in the most brazen manner. There was a good deal of gossip, but at the height of it he went South, and came back married to you. Society chuckled to see how cleverly he had escaped. She knew that it chuckled, and was enraged. That's the whole story! It is not worth thinking about. She'll soon have another fad. You are not the only wife on her black-list, I assure you. If the Judge had a little more hair she would be persecuting me, I presume."

Truth forced an answering smile.

"After all," Mrs. Adams went on, "men are only men, and most of them get their heads turned sooner or later. Van is lucky to have you to keep him in order."

"I don't think," said Truth, slowly, "that I should care for a husband I would have to keep in order."

"Highty-tighty!" laughed the other. "That sentiment will do on the stage, or in books, but not in everyday life. All men will bear watching, — even the Judge."

Truth rose to her feet. "Well," she said wearily, "I must hurry back or I'll be late for luncheon."

"Can't you stay with me? I've been counting on it."

"Really, I can't. Grandma is going to leave so soon. I just came by this way to buy her a bunch of violets."

Mrs. Adams accompanied her to the door. On the threshold Truth turned for a last question. The effort was agony.

"What impression is Mrs. Wiley trying to give as to Van's motives in marrying me?" Truth was surprised at the ease with which the words came, for each was to her a footstep in the death-dance of the little Sea Maid. Mrs. Adams flushed and dropped her eyes.

"Tell me!" urged Truth. "I don't care much."

"Has Mrs. Wiley herself ever tried to enlighten you?"

"Yes, she was at the Hanover a few mornings ago, and — tried."

"The red-headed ——! What did she say? Pique and money?"

Truth uttered an inarticulate sound. "Yes, it was blood-money," she whispered. "I knew it was blood-money!"

For a moment Mrs. Adams stared; she thought Truth had lost her senses under the strain. "Blood-money!" she echoed. "I don't understand."

"Why, my uncle! You heard, — I told you. He betrayed the South, and we are living on that money!"

Mrs. Adams flushed with something like annoyance. "Are you not over that wretched nonsense yet, child? That has nothing to do with it! Nobody in the world but a pack of antediluvian Southern fanatics could even imagine such scruples. No, the money that she meant was money as money, — good, hard gold coin of the realm."

"But that seems almost more awful than the other," said Truth, who was growing white as death.

"Nonsense! Nobody believes her. You are not to trouble your head about it. I wish I had never spoken!"

"But I thank you for telling me," said Truth, with a heart-broken little smile. "You are always good to me."

She went off alone down the half-deserted streets, Mrs.

Adams watching her with tear-brimmed and troubled eyes. The wind had tired itself utterly. From every side came the melancholy drip and tinkle of roof-gutters, and a thick, drifting mist broke into wet sparks against her face. The heaped-up snow was gray and porous, like pumice-stone, the whole earth bruised and dark and swollen with its recent struggle.

For a long time Truth was unconscious of her course, or of her surroundings; then the bright vision of a florist's window recalled her to the present. She went in and bought a great bunch of pure white violets, so delicate and ethereal that they seemed the souls of earthly blossoms.

"To think that blood-money can buy such sweetness!" thought Truth bitterly, as she went into the street again, the flowers well sheltered under her cape.

Some time later she entered her grandmother's room and presented the offering.

Mrs. Dexter kissed her once for welcome and once for the flowers. "We were much worried about you at lunch-time until Van thought of telephoning to Mrs. Adams, and found you were there."

"About when did he telephone?" asked Truth, curiously.

Mrs. Dexter glanced at the clock. "About half-past one, I should say. It is now nearly three."

"Yes, I was at Mrs. Adams's for quite a while. She is a faithful friend." To herself she was saying, "She must have seen that I was suffering, and has tried to shield me from questions at home. It was before twelve that I left her."

"She is, indeed, a good friend," assented Mrs. Dexter. "You ought to be a happy girl with such good friends and such a good husband!" Truth stooped to the floor to pick up something which had not been dropped.

"Run, now, and change your clothes," continued the old lady. "Your feet must be wringing wet." Truth

went toward the door. "But wait a minute! I was nearly forgetting. Van left a message for you, — he wants you to be dressed for the evening when he comes to dinner. He has a pleasant surprise for you."

Truth stopped short, with sudden terror in her eyes. "Where is it, mummie? Oh, I can't go!"

Mrs. Dexter looked around in astonishment. "I said a pleasant surprise, dear."

"Oh, I must hide it all until she is gone!" thought Truth. "I *must* control myself better!" She went into her room and locked the door.

Meanwhile Van was hurrying through work in order to get back home a little earlier than usual. He and Mrs. Dexter had had quite a confidential talk about Truth over the luncheon table. They had agreed that she looked far from well, and both ascribed it to grief at the thought of losing her grandmother.

"She has the tenderest heart in the world," had cried Mrs. Dexter. "She is a dear, good girl," was Van's assent. "I will bring her down to Dexterville on a visit the very first week I can spare time."

The gentle mood was still on him as he rode toward the Hanover late in the afternoon. "A dear, good girl!" he reiterated. "Few Boston men get such docile wives. I sometimes regret that she has lost so much of her free, Southern spirit. I like a plucky woman, — but perhaps they are not so pleasant to live with."

He found Mrs. Dexter and Truth in the drawing-room. The former lay on a sofa, but Truth was standing before the mantel, gazing, apparently, at his photograph. She gave a great start as he entered.

"Well, little one, did grandma tell you of the treat I have for you to-night?"

"She said you had a pleasant surprise," answered Truth, not looking at him.

"It is nothing less than a Symphony concert with Lilli Lehmann as soloist."

Truth barely repressed a cry. "You are very kind, — but — I don't think I had better go."

"Are you ill?"

"No! Not very, — that is —"

Mrs. Dexter's voice rose from the sofa. "If it is because you don't want to leave me, darling, I must tell you that I shall go to bed right after dinner. The packing has tired me. Of course you must go, when Van has taken so much trouble to get the tickets!"

Truth felt her husband's eyes keen upon her. Oh, why, of all nights, should he have chosen this one! To hear music, and with him! It was more than she could bear. But Mrs. Dexter must be thought of first. Once she was safe in the train, nothing would matter.

"Then I will go," she answered. "Do you think this dress will do?"

The gown she had chosen was soft, clinging, and scanty in effect. The material was of gray crêpe, and across the entire surface were sewn detached blossoms of the snowdrop, those little flowers like a half-closed white star, with a dot of green on each petal. Just across the lower edge of the square opening at the throat was a great band and bow of ink-blue velvet. Truth called it her "spring-storm" dress, and was particularly fond of wearing it.

At dinner she made a poor pretence of eating, but, of herself, called for champagne, a proceeding which shocked Mrs. Dexter greatly. The wine forced a glowing crimson into her pale cheeks; Van had never seen her look so beautiful. As they entered their suite, after the meal was over, he threw his arm around her, straining her to his side, and pressing his lips to the fluffy hair above her temple. Was he dreaming? — or had she actually shrunk from the caress?

"It is time to start," he said a little coldly. "Go and get your wraps! You can't pretend to be ill with those cheeks."

Truth went into her room and began putting on her things like an automaton. Her face in the mirror startled her. "I look like a crazy woman," she whispered. "I wonder if I am really going to be crazy!"

Suddenly, with the wraps half buttoned, she flung herself on her knees beside the bed.

"How can I stand it! How can I stand it!" she moaned. "Oh, to hear music to-night, and with *him*! O Father in Heaven! God of the fatherless! Help me this night!"

CHAPTER XXIII

MUSIC THAT DID NOT SOOTHE

THE square space of Boston's Music Hall was filled to the doors. Dowagers nodded and smiled at one another as they entered and took seats, meek husbands following in the rear. A long empty row in the very middle of the first floor still cried for occupants, which were now forthcoming in the person of a stout but rigid Boston "school-marm," well known as proprietor of the most fashionable private academy in the city, who marshalled before her a line of demure misses, flowers culled from the "first families" of Louisiana, Virginia, New York, California, and many other less typical states. When all had found proper places (not without much giggling and many pretty blushes, you may be sure), the duenna took her place in the end seat with a determined thud, like the fastening of a lead clasp to a necklace of jewels. From the far upper gallery wage-earners and students peered down with interest upon the cranial development of "the smart set" beneath.

It was through an accident that Craighead had been able to get places, one of the direct results of Norton's absence in New York, the younger man having secured seats long before for himself and a pretty English girl now on a visit to Mrs. Tooter. They were quite a distance back, almost under the clock that is set in the middle of the first balcony, and Truth was conscious of a feeling of thankfulness that they were so near a place of exit. They had scarcely time to take off wraps and sink inconspicuously into the whole, when a clapping of hands announced that the conductor had entered.

This gentleman smiled vaguely toward the audience, bowed, mounted his pedestal, and turned his back. The concentric curves of musicians that faced him adjusted lips and finger-tips. A nervous interval followed, a slight signal with the baton, and then the gorgeous crash that opens one of Tchaikowski's most famous symphonies.

It was a brilliant work superbly rendered, but to one listener, as least, wearisome and interminable. Truth listened because she could not help herself. Tchaikowski is not easily ignored. The theme writhed like a great serpent against the background of her own loveless future; in the softer passages she soothed herself with visions of death. Once she felt the presence of two figures, a man and a woman, on a lonely moonlit beach.

The last glittering chords of the symphony seemed the dashing off of chains. Truth gave a great breath of relief, and was able to answer with commonplace politeness her husband's commonplace observations. Once she caught Mrs. Adams's eye bent upon her from a side gallery. She smiled brightly, and nodded, but in Mrs. Adams's answering smile perplexity and sadness were evident. "I wonder if she is unhappy, too," thought Truth.

Two of Brahms's songs by Lilli Lehmann were next to come. The prima-donna entered amid hearty applause.

She was a tall woman, unusually graceful for one so stout. Her head was small and well set. Coming to the front she bowed slightly, clasped her hands loosely before her, and stood, for a moment of silence, the image of dignity and composure. The conductor gave an almost imperceptible movement of the baton, the musicians seemed to take in a long breath, and then, somewhere, — from some place in heaven or earth, — a low groundswell of harmony aroused itself and began to creep toward the ears of the audience. Onward it came, subtler and yet louder with each instant, in waves of sound, with, now and again, mysterious eddies of silence. Lehmann threw back her head, gave a single note

that was like the core of a laugh, and plunged into the torrent. Her song was a sea-gull with sunlight on its wings. From wave-crest to wave-crest it skimmed and dipped, shaking off bright drops of melody at each fresh venture. At last it wearied, and the tumult of sound wearied also, and began to sob and moan into silence. Before Truth's excited imagination a visible sea was stretched, — dull and quiet now, with a long beach that curved in the moonlight like a scimitar. Two figures stood on the beach. She shivered, and threw her thought and interest outward, to meet the new note that Lehmann was loosing from her throat. It was the white sea-gull again, balancing above the cowed eternity of waves, and ready for flight into eternal silence.

Truth lost herself between the interval of this song and the next. The latter was well begun before she realized that she was listening. The same troubled grayness of waves began it, the same poise and dip of wings; but then a change came, — earth and its material seas were scorned for flight into a mystery that lay beyond all horizons. Now it was spirits of the air that sang, clasping hands in a circle as of Fra Angelico's visions of angels. Truth knew the stars that shone on each transfigured forehead, heard the soft winds of Paradise in their parted locks, smelled the pale luminous blossoms on which they trod. This was something to have lived for, — to have suffered for! Could grief alone give such revelations? She longed to speak to the shapes, perhaps to join them, — but beyond the dance of joy was something else, and this drew her, — thrilled her, — dragged her very soul from its house of clay. The mists parted and she saw. It was a great, white, lonely angel that bowed her head and wept. Truth heard the harp-notes of her tears, — were they the same that now ran down her own human cheeks? And was it her guardian angel that wept?

A single note began to recur, — to dominate all themes,

— like the pass-word of a banished soul. There it was, — again — again! “If it comes once more I cannot stand it!” she heard herself whisper. Gray clouds swept in and blotted out all visions. They drifted so close that she felt their chill on her heart. Behind the gray curtain a tumult of sound-mystery strove. And the note came — again — again! — clear and piercing as from a great distance. Truth put her hands to her ears, and, at the curious looks that her neighbors gave, jerked them down again. The vast audience seemed to rise and circle about her. It changed to a sea of grinning human skulls. She heard a dreadful clapping of hands; the sound was like hail upon an exposed brain.

“Let us go! I am sick!” she gasped. The clutch on Van’s arm hurt him. He gave one look into her face and rose.

“Are you able to walk out?”

“Yes! Yes! Don’t ask me! Let us hurry!”

She flew on at such a pace that he could scarcely keep up. As they reached the carriage, “Go fast, driver!” she called, and then sprang in without noticing Van’s proffered hand. Van followed more deliberately. He was already in a state of vague irritation, such as most men feel when alarmed. Neither spoke during the short drive. He could hear her irregular, excited breathing.

In the hotel elevator she broke silence. “Don’t wake grandma!”

“I have no intention of doing so, until I find out what is the matter with you.”

Her excitement deepened as they entered his study; he could hear her teeth chatter.

His first move was to pour out a small glass of brandy. “Drink it!” he commanded. “If this does not restore you I shall telephone for a physician.”

“No! no!” she cried, shrinking from him; but whether she meant the brandy or the physician, he could not be sure.

"Drink it!" he said sternly, and held the glass against her lips. She drank it all.

"Now go to bed!" he said more kindly. "You have had a nervous shock of some sort. Don't try to speak of it to-night!"

She was still half choked with the brandy. "No, wait! — I won't — go!" she managed to gasp.

He took her arm and led her toward the bedroom door. "You shall go! You are on the verge of hysteria now. This is no time of night for a scene."

She flung off his hand. "I can't. I must speak now, I *must*. Let me speak now! It is killing me, — *killing* me!"

A premonition of the truth flashed into Craighead's brain, but instead of clearing, dazed it. "Not to-night, Truth! Take my advice! You are not well enough to-night. I should never have taken you to the concert."

"Oh, but I'm glad you did," she cried a little wildly. "I could never have told you if it hadn't been for the music. It has freed me. Oh, Van — Van! Tell me the truth! — Do you love Mrs. Wiley?"

The blow had fallen. The blood rushed from Craighead's face to his heart. He tried to steady himself for some kind of answer; but no answer came. "Who has been trying to poison your mind with this tale?" he said, at length.

"That's not the question!" she cried, beating her hands together. "That's not the question! Do you love her? Did you go to her house by the sea last summer? Did you? — oh, I'm going crazy —"

"You are crazy now," said her husband. "Go to bed, Truth! There's a good child!"

"No! no! I'm *not* a good child. I'm not a child at all. I'm a woman, and I won't be put aside."

"Truth!" Craighead tried to speak quietly. "I will tell you all there is to tell, but when you are calmer. Do not try to force this question now!"

"Then it is so. You won't deny it. You *can't* deny it. Oh, what shall I do, — what shall I do!"

"I think you 'll just — wait."

Suddenly she became white and calm as he. "Then you refuse to explain to me what all Boston knows and is laughing at! I, your wife, am a laughing-stock! Do you hear that?"

"I certainly am not accustomed to make explanations at the point of a pistol. Truth! be reasonable! Don't force this issue now! I'm holding myself well in, but I'm not a patient man —"

"Did you go to Ponkatuck?"

"I refuse to answer."

"You *dare* not answer. You're *afraid*!"

Van bit his under-lip and felt his nostrils shake. He turned toward the door. "I shall go to my club for the night."

Quick as thought she was against the door, her back pressed against it, her eyes gleaming at him like those of an infuriated tigress.

"Perhaps you will tell me this, then, before you go. Did you kiss that woman — last summer — any time after I had become your wife?"

Craighead was struck dumb. This revelation made useless further inquiries as to the origin of Truth's suspicions. Only Orchid could have done this. The moments throbbed on in silence. Each was a soundless death-knell. At last Craighead spoke. "Yes, I kissed her."

Truth threw her hands to her heart. The man hurried on, breathlessly.

"But only once, Truth, — and in justice to her —"

Truth was reeling; he sprang forward.

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me!"

She recovered herself. "And now, perhaps you will condescend to tell me your real motives for marrying me. I thought it chivalry, disinterested kindness!"

The bitter contempt in her voice effaced in an instant all self-reproach and pity in Craighead's soul.

"Truth! have a care! Do not drive me too far!"

"If you wanted to keep on kissing her, why did you marry me?"

Van struck his clenched hand against a chair. The frail wood shattered.

"My God!" he panted. "Are all women devils?"

"Why did you marry me?" came again the pitiless young voice at the door.

"Perhaps your informants have been kind enough to enlighten you."

"They have!" said Truth between set teeth. "It was money! You married me to get the *money*!"

Van quivered in every muscle. A sort of nervous ague passed over him; then he, too, became calm.

"Perhaps you will recollect, Mrs. Craighead, that even at the moment of soliciting your hand in marriage I gave you the liberty to annul at will all my rights over you. I reiterate that statement now."

"And did you think I would n't take advantage of it? You have tricked me and lied to me! I shall go back with grandma."

"I have neither tricked you nor lied to you, as you will see when you come to your senses. You will do me the justice of admitting that, even before this, I urged you to go."

"Oh, you urged me!" she cried. "I see the reason of it now. You will be free to go to — her!" Van saw that she shivered, and that her face grew, if possible, more pinched and white. But there was no room left for pity, and he answered nothing.

"I would like to ask one favor of you, Mr. Craighead. Please say nothing of this to grandma until after we are gone."

Van bowed assent.

"And there is another thing," she went on hurriedly.

"I've thought about it for a long time, but now it is all clear. It has cursed us both from the beginning. Oh, I wish from my heart that I had never seen you, or taken it."

"You are not lucid," said Van, darkly.

"It is my Uncle Eugene's money. The blood-money!" she cried. "I have been living on it and it has cursed me. My grandfather in heaven has turned his face from me. I could never have gone on using it, even if — there had n't been a Mrs. Wiley."

Craighead was now thoroughly sobered. He felt instinctively that this would be the harder of the two obstacles to overcome.

"And what do you propose to do with the estate, if I may ask?"

"I will make over the money to you, — every cent of it. You know I wanted to do this from the first. Then you will be free, for I will never live and share it with you again. I don't know about grandma. If she is willing to receive an income from you, I believe you will be generous enough to give it."

"And yourself, — how will you live?"

"I have thought of all that, too. The advantages of travel and education that I have received cannot be given back. The only atonement left is to use them for the benefit of my poor South. It will be easy for me now to start a school near Dexterville, and there I can earn enough to support myself, and soon begin to pay back to you some of the money already spent."

"It's a piece of idiotic sentimentality!" cried the man, angrily. "Do you think I would be fool enough to allow it? You will think differently when you come to your senses." He began to walk up and down the room.

"I have just come to my senses. The money is yours, I tell you! I'll never touch it again. You have urged me to go with grandma, as you say, and — I need never come back to trouble you, or be in your way."

"Don't you know that I can't take your money, even if I were so low as to wish it? If you refuse, it goes to a statue of Abraham Lincoln."

She pondered a moment, then answered slowly, "I — think — not. When the money was once accepted for me, that destroyed all chance of the statue, no matter what was done afterward."

Van was pleased with her acuteness, but he did not reply.

"Is n't it true?" she urged. "Can't I do anything with it now that I please?"

"You omit one trifling point. I am your legal guardian until you come of age. You can do nothing without my approval."

She looked a little frightened. "Can't I even settle it upon you without your consent?"

"You cannot." He stopped walking and watched her face narrowly. For a long moment the dark brows were together in a frown, then her face cleared. "I think I am glad of that!"

"Why?"

She shook her head. "I could n't tell you in words."

Van resumed his impatient walking up and down. He did not pause to look into her face as he said:—

"Truth, you have allowed these two foolish issues of your uncle's estate and — er — Mrs. Wiley to get tangled strangely and fatally in your mind. Listen to me! You are tamely yielding yourself a victim to Mrs. Wiley's subtle and malignant plan to separate us. I hope to God that I shall never see Mrs. Wiley again. I do not love her! I hate her! And as for marrying you, I scorn the insinuation of mercenary motives. There is but one real issue between us, — are you going to persist in this absurd idea of using no more of your uncle's money?"

"I am," she said. "Nothing can change me in that. And I am going now with grandma, in any case."

"And how do you propose to buy even your tickets?"

Truth threw back her head and gave a little startled breath. "That is so!" she said, as if to herself. Then she moved away swiftly from the door and went up to Van. "Won't you, — just until we get this settled, — won't you promise to pay for everything, — yourself?"

"That's what I have been doing with all our regular household expenses, Truth, and shall continue to do after you go away."

Truth hung her head. "I should like to pay that back to you, too."

Van scowled. "People can't annul the legal responsibilities of marriage so easily as you seem to think. It is my duty to support you as well as I can afford, even though your uncle's fortune is sunk to the bottom of the sea."

"You must understand," Truth said hurriedly, "that if you take the money for yourself, even though we are separated, I cannot accept a cent of support from you. It must be a break between us, forever."

"You are mad," he said, but with more weariness than anger. "Go to the South for a few days. It will be best for both of us. Maybe you can see a little clearer off there to yourself. You will come to your senses in time."

"I shall never change on this point, and you know it. Don't count on that."

"I count on nothing," he said. "I merely take all chances. Shall it be a truce between us until the decision is reached?"

"Yes," she said. "I am so tired now, — so tired. Are you going to your club to-night?"

"Yes."

He moved toward the door, and this time she made no attempt to interfere, but followed at some distance. In the little entrance hall she tried to lift his coat, but her hands trembled so that it fell to the ground.

"Go to bed, Truth," he said in a kind tone. "You look perfectly exhausted."

She tried to speak, — tried to force some sound to her lips, but a sudden suffocation was upon her. She threw her hands out toward him, but he was drawing the heavy coat about him and did not see.

"Good-night," he said pleasantly, and went out without looking around.

In another moment Mrs. Dexter was aroused by the sound of a fall, and hurried in to find Truth in a dead faint on the floor of her bedroom.

CHAPTER XXIV

FAREWELLS

At the breakfast-table, next morning, all three were somewhat nervous and ill at ease, for although Truth took pains to remark more than once that she was perfectly well, and felt no evil results from her evening's excitement, her pale cheeks and heavy eyes belied her. Once or twice she seemed on the point of making a disclosure, but a glance at Craighead's dark face checked her.

"I wish I had not made you go last night," said Mrs. Dexter, regretfully.

"I echo the wish," was Van's grim reply.

"But I don't!" cried Truth. "I'm glad I went. The music was superb. Van and I came home early, and had a long talk about things." She gave Van a look of miserable defiance.

"You are not yourself at all, Truth," said Mrs. Dexter in the tone of one whose mind is made up. "I never saw you look so sick. I shall not go South and leave you."

"But that is the good news I have to tell you. We decided last night that I was to go too. You know that Mr. Craighead has urged it from the first."

A slight smile trembled at the corners of Craighead's clean-shaven lips. He looked steadily into Truth's eyes for an instant and then said to Mrs. Dexter, "Yes, it is true that I think Truth had better go with you. She is not herself, — and the trip will be the best thing for all of us."

Truth felt as if she had heard her own death-sentence read aloud.

"Now, my dear Van," said the old lady, "that is very kind and thoughtful of you, but I am not going to let you two young people sacrifice yourselves for me. I know how you need Truth just now—" Truth interrupted with an hysterical little laugh.

"I shall not let my own personal desires interfere with any plans I may have to make for Truth," said Craighead, with a meaning lost on Mrs. Dexter. "She is ill, and I honestly believe a change to the South will be the best thing for her."

"I fear you are sacrificing yourself," persisted the old lady.

"You don't seem to be thinking about me at all," said Truth, her lips beginning to quiver.

"My darling *child*! What on earth have I got but you! I was going to give up my trip for the present, until you were better."

"No, no! Let's go—let's go home! Boston is so cold and hard—"

"Oh, hush, dear! You don't know what you are saying!" whispered Mrs. Dexter with a frightened look toward Van.

"Van does n't care!" cried Truth, with the recklessness of utter misery. "Do you care, Van?"

Van turned and looked at her with inscrutable eyes. The same slight smile trembled at the corner of his lips. For a moment he did not speak, and she gazed back into his masterful face with thoughts that were a screaming rookery of doubts, fears, jealousies, and love. Never had she loved him as at that instant. She could have fallen at his feet, asking leave to die there for the bliss of death near him. She could have been his servant, his dog, his worn-out glove. She did not care whether he had kissed Mrs. Wiley or not,—she did not care how many women he had kissed. In some horrible way it seemed to en-

hance his value. Then the thought came, "He will never give up the money for me, — and if he takes it, will God make me keep on loving, like this, a man that I must despise?"

This inward question, together with the one to Van, was destined never to gain an answer. Craighead leaned toward her suddenly, and said in a low voice: "You are betraying yourself. Drop your eyes, and pretend to be eating. People are turning around."

It was Sunday morning. All over the city church-bells were clamoring rival invitations. Mrs. Dexter announced her intention of going to service, and invited the young couple to accompany her. Van answered for both:—

"Thank you very much, but if Truth is to leave with you Tuesday evening, she has not any too much time left for packing. My share of the work lies at the office and the freight depot. I shall have to be away most of the time."

Truth followed him to the door, and made a pretence of helping with his overcoat. "Thank you. Is there anything you wish to say?"

Truth could not meet his eyes. "Will you decide — soon?" she faltered.

"Probably; but I must have leisure and calm. You, too, have something to decide, I presume."

"I — I —" she began.

"Wait until you get home and can think it out undisturbed," he said in a kind voice. "It is for this that I have decided to let you go. It will be best for both of us." He stooped and kissed her as one kisses a child.

A strange, new excitement took possession of the young wife. Running back to the rooms she began chattering to her grandmother of home, and the presents they were to give, and the things they would need to take for themselves, until the old lady was fairly carried off her feet. When the church hour came, and Mrs. Dexter had to

leave, Truth was emptying, with frenzied haste, the little black battered trunk that she had owned as Truth Dexter. Heaps of clothing lay about as if just deposited by a blizzard.

"Don't tire yourself out, darling!" was the last loving injunction.

Left to herself, Truth's excitement died away as quickly as it had come. She forgot her packing, sank to a sitting posture on the floor, and drooped her head in thought. After a long while she rose, locked the door that led into the outer hall, and went slowly into her bedroom. The door of the little library next to it stood wide open. She could see his desk, the books, her little cushioned stool. "I am going away," she said aloud. "I shall never see these rooms again. I shall never see him again. I wonder why I don't suffer."

She went to the bed and put her face against his pillow. Here she remained quiet for a long time. "No," she whispered, at length, "I can't suffer, even here. I have used up all the ache already. I thought I loved him, but maybe I can't love anybody. All I can think of is that he won't be sorry. No wonder he can't love me when I am so heartless!"

From the bedroom she passed into the study and began to arrange the pretty trinkets that she had bought for his desk. In the midst of the work a strange dizziness, such as she had felt many times during the past few months, swept over her with relentless force. She sank, half-fainting, into Van's big leather chair, and the next sound of which she became conscious was her grandmother's knock at the locked outer door.

Van did not return to luncheon. During that long afternoon, in which Mrs. Dexter was, for the most part, engrossed in her own packing, Truth's numbed consciousness began to rouse itself. The full significance of her conversation the night before came as a shock. She had been the one to force an ultimatum which was to decide

the whole of her future life, and affect many besides herself. She did not waver from her determination to live no longer on her uncle's money, but now more important, more fundamental, more excoriating than any issue built on worldly affairs, seemed the blasting revelation implied in that one admission, "I kissed her!" No wonder that she had fallen as at a physical blow. Yet, an hour ago, at breakfast, this most horrible thought had been blotted out in the agony of her own personal love. Was she losing her senses? Could any human intellect endure such extremes of emotion, — such ruthless tempering of fibre?

Truth's head dropped with a groan. The man she loved and to whom she was married had kissed his friend's wife. There was the bare fact, with shame enough for all concerned; but apart from shame, what right had she to resent the infidelity? From the first he had made it plain enough that love for herself played no part in the marriage. Pity, perhaps, and chivalry, but not love. Mrs. Adams had hinted, long ago, on that dreadful day of storm, that it was pique, and — money, — but hell itself would be too small to hold the horror of this belief! He had said that his heart was charred. Whence, then, the spark that had flashed into a kiss?

"Are you going to take all these new books?" called Mrs. Dexter from the next room.

"No, none of the new ones. None of the new things at all. Only the old things I brought from home."

Mrs. Dexter was taking all of her own possessions, the Colonel's picture, her rocking-chair, work table, and everything. "It is so easy to bring them back, you know," she had said apologetically. Truth smiled sadly, she knew well enough that never again would the aristocratic Hanover shelter those old-fashioned Southern treasures.

Van, as was usual in such emergencies, showed himself a tower of strength. And if details of preparation kept

him away most of the time, Mrs. Dexter was, herself, too busy to notice or comment upon it.

Truth's decision to go had been so sudden that only her immediate circle of friends could be informed of the fact. Norton took a flying train from New York the moment he heard of it; and Monday evening (the day before starting) this volatile youth, together with old Craighead, Mrs. Adams and her Judge, spent the evening at the Hanover.

Norton was the last to arrive. Mrs. Adams had been very uneasy in mind concerning Truth, ever since the warning about Orchid, and the news of the unexpected departure had increased her fears. Her first question on entering was, "What made you change your mind so suddenly? You told me that nothing could induce you to leave Van and the book."

Truth's eyes fell. "I felt so much sicker," she murmured, "that we all thought I had better go for a change."

"How long do you intend to desert the hub of the universe?"

"That is n't decided yet."

Mrs. Adams saw that Van was watching them. She drew Truth aside. "I've been a good deal worried about what I said to you of that red-headed Wiley woman. There may not be a word of truth in it after all. No doubt she's dangerous, but she can't do you any harm. Everybody can see that Van is dead in love with you."

"Oh, don't!" cried Truth, sharply, her face like ashes.

Old Mr. Craighead came in at this instant, and Truth broke from her friend to welcome him.

But Mrs. Adams was far from being satisfied. When the new bustle had subsided she looked around for Van. The Judge and Mrs. Dexter were exchanging old-fashioned compliments in a nook by the fireside. Truth had taken possession of her parent-in-law, and was inviting him to come South and see what *real* life was like, while Van

stood alone, within the pink-lighted circle of a tall piano lamp, his elbow on a corner of the piano. Mrs. Adams stared a moment; she had never before thought of him as a handsome man, but the dark beauty of his face now startled her. "No wonder that Orchid Wiley can't bear to give him up, and that my poor little Truth is eating her heart out with jealousy," she thought.

"Well, Sir Benedict! How is it that you are letting Truth go in the very midst of the book, — not to mention her social season?"

Van's smile of welcome died. "It is practically of her own choice, though her ill health has made me advise it."

"Probably the poor child would be better for a change," said the other in a matter-of-fact tone. "She has been miserable of late. She ran in to see me a few mornings ago, — that day of the storm, if you'll remember, — when you telephoned. It was no weather for her to be out in. When she first came in she was so flushed and excited that I did not realize how pale and thin she really was."

Van inclined his head in polite attention. Mrs. Adams's voice lowered. "On that day I said something to her that I have bitterly regretted."

Van flashed a look into her face, and took his elbow from the piano.

"I might as well confess and have done with it —"

"I think it would be better."

"Well, then, I warned her of a danger of which I had recently heard. It concerned Orchid Wiley."

Van gave an imperceptible start. "And what could have been the danger?"

"Oh, only woman's weapons, — slander, and malicious hints. She is undoubtedly an enemy to Truth. I said just enough to put Truth on her guard."

"How did Truth take it?"

"So quietly that I was deceived, and went further than I had intended. At the last she told me that

Mrs. Wiley had been to the Hanover two days before, and tried to insinuate — things."

Van's face was alert. "Two days before," he repeated, as if to himself. "That was Tuesday. Yes, the change in Truth began then! I could wish, Mrs. Adams, that you had told me sooner."

"It's the first time I have seen you," said Mrs. Adams, plaintively. "Oh, don't tell me that harm has already been done! You and Truth are like my own children."

"Don't trouble yourself an instant. The difficulty must have arisen sooner or later, and it has complications that you do not know." Mrs. Adams looked so horrified that he hastened to add: "The complications have nothing whatever to do with Mrs. Wiley or with what you said to Truth. They refer to her own private convictions. The mischief that Mrs. Wiley has made serves only as a sort of fuse to a powder-magazine."

Mrs. Adams gave a sound that was half a sob. "Oh, Van, don't be angry! Don't think me an old meddler, — but you must not let that red-head — that — er — vain Mrs. Wiley come between you and your sweet young wife! You don't appreciate Truth yet! — the dearest, gentlest, most trusting child —" Van interrupted with a mirthless laugh.

"Perhaps she is not so gentle and trusting as you think."

"But she is!" insisted the peacemaker, almost in tears. "She has n't a wish or a desire apart from you. Look at her now, with those big eyes and that pathetic mouth! How can any man help adoring a child like that?"

Van's glance followed that of his companion to the spot where Truth stood. She was leaning against a chair as if for support, her face directly toward Van, but her eyes raised to meet those of the elder Craighead, who was explaining something in his caustic, deliberate way. She looked scarcely more than sixteen. She was utterly

unconscious of observation, and in that childish, listening attitude seemed so pathetically innocent and untried that Van's heart sank and his pride faltered. "She is only a child, after all," he thought. "What have I given her for her love, her confidence, and her fortune?" All at once he felt himself to be old beyond the magic touch of youth, to be hardened, and unspeakably tired of life.

Mrs. Adams was watching his face keenly, but before either could speak the sound of quick footsteps in the corridor turned all attention to the door. A succession of knocks played on the wooden panel, and the electric bell whirled as if in a fit.

"Quincy!" burst from more than one pair of smiling lips.

It was indeed Quincy and no other. He was, as usual, jaunty and good to look at. In his hand he bore a small but exquisite bunch of lilies of the valley. He greeted each member of the little circle with some characteristic and appropriate sally, but his smile faded a little as he approached Truth.

"Are you really going to leave at this short notice, Mrs. Craighead? I say it's a shame! You don't even give a fellow time enough to work up an unpremeditated address of farewell."

Truth laughed. Her face always brightened more than she knew when Norton was around.

"'I'm gwine to Alabamy, an' dare I'm gwine to stay,'" she sang teasingly.

Norton pretended indignation. "Oh, I can finish it! I've heard it often enough. 'An' fum my heart I'ze sorry, dat I ever kum away!'"

"Just so," responded Truth, gravely.

"But what is Van thinking of to let you go roaming all over creation without him? He's a cork-man! He's no good!"

"Maybe he'll be glad to get rid of me."

“‘Mebbe so, *an*’ mebbe not,’ as they say up in Vermont. But if he is, I’ll take down the thermometer of my regard for him. Below freezing is the mark!”

Van sauntered toward them. “Suppose you ask Truth how she could endure the thought of leaving *me*! The Boston wife makes her own decisions, as you know.”

“Hear! hear!” cried the Judge from his corner.

“But she is not a Boston wife, — that’s just the point!” cried Norton. “No offence meant, Mrs. Adams!”

“Oh, I’m half Southern,” said that lady, cheerfully. “I’ll turn the other cheek.”

“Quincy, you are bound to get yourself into trouble to-night,” interposed Truth. “Come over to this corner; I must give you some sisterly advice before I start.”

They walked side by side to a corner in which was a divan half surrounded by growing plants. Every eye in the room followed. Truth was tall, but Norton nearly a head taller. Both were beautiful, and fair, and young. Norton’s curls were the exact colour of Truth’s fluffy hair, and his fine mouth might have been cut by the same master-sculptor. “What a perfect couple!” thought Mrs. Adams, and then came to herself with a guilty start. She turned her eyes toward Craighead. He was staring at the two with a look that pierced the kind soul who watched him. A flash of inspiration flashed into her brain. “He loves her more than he knows. This visit South is not a visit, but a possible separation, perhaps even a divorce. Oh, something *must* be done to prevent this disaster! It will do Orchid Wiley too much good!”

Truth and Norton had seated themselves and were gazing into each other’s eyes in frank and evident delight. Norton was now about the only person with whom Truth dropped into the old familiar Southern speech. To her it was relief, to him unmistakable pleasure. He had caught up many of her quaint phrases, and had even acquired a fair imitation of darky dialect

"Did you know that you had n't given me the flowers yet?" said Truth. "Or, maybe, you did n't bring them for me!"

Norton lifted the bunch slowly and stared into it as he answered: "Yes, I brought them for you. They have always reminded me of you from the first."

"Oh, no!" she protested. "They are too sweet and pure for me. Besides, they are not a Gulf-coast flower, — they don't grow any lower down than Tennessee and Virginia. But I love them best of all the flowers you have up here. Somehow, they always make me think of — tears."

"What has made you decide to go South?" asked Norton, in a very low voice.

Truth glanced once into his face, then lowered her eyes. "Oh, Quin, don't ask me! You will find it all out some time. I was goin' to come to you with everything, but you were in New York. It's too late now! Let's play now that it was just homesickness and the chance of goin' with grandma that made me decide."

Norton did not attempt a reply.

"And it *was* homesickness," she went on eagerly. "I just *tremble* at the thought of getting into the piney woods, alone, once more! I wish you could be there!"

"I wish I could. You know, I love the old place almost as much as you do. You have made it live for me. I know it all! Uncle Norah, and Moses the Mule, and Aunt Big Mary, and the setters —"

"And the red rooster, and Sir Francis Drake, and my mockin'-bird —" Tears welled up in her eyes and fell upon the flower tears in her hand. She wiped her cheeks quite frankly, smiling at Norton the while.

"Do you know, Quin," she began after a pause, "that you are really the nicest boy I ever met? You don't dream how much I like you! Will you promise me something?"

"Anything."

"I want you to promise not to call me Mrs. Craighead,—not even to think of me as Mrs. Craighead ever any more. After I am gone, if you ever think of me at all, let it be this way,—‘Truth said that,’ or ‘Truth loved the flowers I brought her,’ or ‘Truth was a very loving friend to me.’"

She looked up in gentle good faith, but as she met his eyes, blue-black with suppressed feeling and luminous with unshed tears, a little pang of apprehension seized her. The boy gave a miserable gulp.

"I shall love to call you ‘Truth.’ Indeed, I always think of you so in my heart. But why do you speak so strangely—as if you might never come back?"

"I may not. That’s a fact!" she said. "Nobody knows what will happen to them. All of us, at times, feel certain that we are goin’ to die young."

"I don’t, for one," said Norton, stoutly. "I intend to hang out my sign until it actually falls into bits, like the one horse shay. Why do you have such morbid thoughts? It’s not a bit like you!"

"How do you know what’s like me and what is n’t? One year ago I was a perfect stranger."

"Oh, one year ago! One century! But now— Oh, Truth! if there is *any* way in which I can help you,—if there is anything that I can do—!"

Norton’s secret was in his face. Conversation in other parts of the room had stopped. All were trying not to look toward that particular corner, to appear as if they did not hear Norton’s impassioned words. Mrs. Adams rose to her feet.

"What unkind friends we are!" she cried with unnecessary vehemence. "These good people are to set off to-morrow night on a long, tiresome journey, and we are staying all these hours. Good-night, Mrs. Dexter! Good-bye, Truth, dear! We all will be at the station to-morrow; that is, unless you would rather go off more quietly. How is it? Be frank, child! You know that we want to do

everything to show our grief at losing you and grandma even for a time, but we don't want to be in the way!"

Truth hesitated. She longed to ask them not to come, but was too delicate. Van came to her assistance —

"Since you are so thoughtful, dear Mrs. Adams, I'll admit that it would be better for you not to come. Station farewells are ghastly exhibitions at best, and both Mrs. Dexter and Truth are unnerved."

"Very sensible conclusion," remarked the Judge.

When these good friends were gone, old Craighead shuffled toward the door, with Truth following close. In the little antechamber or hallway she caught his hand, held it tightly in both her own, and said, "Father, you have been *lots* better to me than even you know. And" (here she gave a small, hysterical chuckle) "you did n't want to like me a bit, — now, honest — did you?"

The old man's face wrinkled into dry smiles. "Ye ain't far off the track there, I guess! How do ye know I like you now?"

"How do you know I like *you*?" she retorted. "But you do!"

"Waal," he said provokingly, "*some* good had ter come out er Judee, an' I guess you're a sport on a rotten branch. Your grandma ain't lovin' me any too much!"

"That's because you tease her so about the South. But *I* don't mind! I know you don't mean a word of it!" She threw her arms about him for a hug, so emphatic that, when released, the old man staggered back, and began rubbing the back of his neck.

"I guess you don't need any Hoff's Malt Bitters to bring out your muscles, Trewth! Waal, good-bye! Arry-voy! as your dude Bostonian says. Yes, I'll miss ye, an' be lookin' fer ye to come back. I never thought to say so much. There! there! Don't bother 'bout givin' me another hug, — my bottle er liniment's low!"

Norton was the last to leave. When the final handshake came his face was so lugubrious that Truth cried,

through her own tears, "Why, Quin! You look like you were goin' to your own funeral. Never mind! Cheer up! We'll see you at Dexterville yet."

Van did not even glance toward his junior partner, but as that youth struggled into his overcoat began to follow suit.

"Going out at this time of night?" asked Norton in amazement. "Yes, these stuffy rooms give me the headache." He did not say good-bye to Truth.

Next day dawned gray, cold, and windy. The train was to leave at five P. M., but Van started early, in order to allow time for possible difficulties.

All the afternoon Truth had been excited and gay; "fey" the Scotch would have called it. She was certain, now, that her capacity for suffering was at an end; it was strangely easy not to remember, not to think ahead. She kept Mrs. Dexter laughing till her eyeglasses fell off a dozen times, and even Van smiled grimly more than once.

The porter, washerwoman, elevator boy, and various hotel clerks all were bidden farewell, and cheered by a generous tip. To her own special bell-boy, the negro in buttons, she said, "Larry, you may be a dark-skinned white gen'l'man up here, but you'll have lots more fun down home. You'd better come!"

The nervous excitement of the last few days was now stretched to the point of reaction. It was true that she could neither think nor reason. Present interests hedged her in a narrow ring, and nothing else seemed of great importance except that she should not forget a single hotel servant.

At the station, her small reserve of self-control came near deserting her. The noise of passengers, the smell of gas and humanity, and, above all, the hearse-like aspect of the sleeping-car, oppressed her with a sense of unreality and horror.

Van led them into the drawing-room section, and began to busy himself with shawl-straps and parcels. The thought came suddenly that this extra expense was all from Van's own earnings, and that she was demanding of him the burden of two helpless women, in whom his interest was doubtful. Neither Mrs. Dexter nor Van noticed her. She crept from the little compartment, and stood flattened against the wall of the passageway. The two voices within came to her as from a great heated distance. That same strange dizziness was upon her, and she threw back her head, gasping for breath. Van's hand was on her shoulder.

"Truth, try not to worry too much! You look desperately ill! I am going to do the best for both of us, — believe that. It is a strange thing that you have demanded, and, for your own sake, I must be sure that you really understand your own motives. Talk it over with grandma as soon as you are strong enough. As for the other matter, I was a brute to speak as I did. I am ashamed." Truth threw one hand up to his breast.

"Don't say any more! I can't bear it. But — I don't care, — I *don't*! Let it go! — only — only — don't give me up!"

Van held her to him very gently. Mrs. Dexter caught a glimpse of them thus, and gave a great sigh of relief. "Poor little one!" he whispered. "She doesn't quite know what she does want, does she?"

"Yes! I want — *you*!" sobbed Truth.

"All aboard!"

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE WOODS

DEW still glistened in the shadows as Truth went, searching for the memories of her childhood, into the wide, silent treasure-house of the forest. At first, as if resentful of minor impressions, she was deliberately unobservant. Her old green sunbonnet with its dear, indelible stains of blackberry, persimmon, and walnut, she drew downward until her lowered eyes could see only a semicircle of ground, — now flecked with dry grass, now bare, — and this kept moving with her, like the cardboard turf about the feet of a paper-doll. The vague, familiar odor of earth, mingled with that of the old bonnet and black shawl (the same she had worn on the beach at Biloxi), produced a partial anæsthesia, in which recent events dissolved and those of childhood began to take on luminous outlines.

It was one of those Southern March mornings when the wind, shamed into gentleness, wanders irresolute from hill to hill, or drowns with violets in the valleys. The main road, pink from its amalgamation of sand and clay, stretched out like a fallen scarf of dawn, and upon it the trees dropped leaf-shadows in olive mosaics. All was motionless save where a dewy spray flouted the uncere- monious leave-taking of a bird. Far off a woodpecker tapped his hollow drum.

Bending her course now from the main road into the wood, she took a little pathless path down the slope, here embossed with countless tiny, scalloped terraces banked up with pine-straw and the roots of grass, and brimmed

with pink-white sand. Between could be traced, in shadowy ripples, the water-courses of many a summer shower. As a child how often had she planted her iris banners, and worked out flower-tales of mediæval chivalry upon these pigmy battlements! She was at the very scene of Ivanhoe's triumph, — her Ivanhoe of a twig, in leaf armor and acorn helmet. The little drama seemed to spring into life before her eyes. A spasmodic contraction caught at her throat. She flung back her head and clutched the nearest tree for support. It was a slender dogwood in full, white pomp of blossom.

“When dogwood's white,
Fishers' delight!”

That was what she and grandpa used to sing! The snowy discs fluttered down upon her in an indignant shower. She swayed a moment with the tree, and kept closed eyes until the cool, thin myrrh of the pines should have brought strength.

She strolled on now more slowly. The forgotten sun-bonnet hung in an octagonal green bucket at the back of her neck. On every side great pines stood rigidly upright in the slanting soil, their brown, scarred trunks softening to purple in the broad belts of distance. From the roof overhead a pine-burr suddenly fell, as, in old Eastern temples, a bronze bolt, or knob, is loosed, at last, from mouldering timbers.

Truth stooped for the gift, but paused before she reached it, arrested by a new odor, a new, delicious, tantalizing fragrance that seemed a challenge, a call, the laughter of a hidden sprite. In an instant she had flung herself on her knees and was tearing straw and dry leaves from a heap at the edge of the nearest embankment. Her cheeks were crimson, her lips already parted for the cry of triumph. Yes, she had found it already, — a great cluster of the wild arbutus, waxen, with coral buds!

She knelt over, sniffing at them, taking in long, quivering breaths; then, prone on the earth, with one elbow deep in sand, began deliberately to pluck away each bit of straw and dead leaf. She marvelled for the hundredth time at the delicate adjustment of blossoms among such extraneous substances. Not a petal was scratched. The close, green foliage, richly fluted, and lined with thin, brown fur, was almost as wonderful as the flowers. After all, it was no less than a miracle that here, from a handful of sand caught up in a crescent of dead leaves, should spring a wreath of wax, enamel, and gems. Who taught the buds to draw red ichor from the same source that gave their shielding coats impervious harshness?

When the whole group lay clear, even to a circling border of bare earth, Truth rose and stood above it in silent adoration. Then she walked away, pulled down her bonnet over her eyes once more, and, turning, came back, pretending surprise at the discovery. At last she knelt again, selected one tiny, crimson bud-spray as trophy, and carefully, twig by twig, leaf by leaf, replaced about the others their rude covering. Her troubles had vanished; she was Truth, the child, once more.

Now she looked about her frankly. At the foot of the hill lay a dark, thick line of other trees than pines, a blue-green wall of huge magnolias, cypresses, tulip trees, and bay, these, with a thick undergrowth of glossy-leaved shrubs, marking the course of "the branch." Rich, moist odors rose among the pine-stems to greet her, that indescribable earth-smell which is the incense of all true nature worshippers, and the more tangible hints of dripping resin, and the thick, oozing juices of gums. As her foot touched the first spongy outskirt, she said aloud, "O God, don't let the snakes bite me!" This prayer she had always uttered, when as a child she had ventured into supposed lairs of the moccasin or rattlesnake. She felt nothing incongruous in it now, only the usual childish

confidence that she was protected. The "branch" flowers are late, and none were here to welcome her except the wine-colored stars of the red bay. These she gloated over with eye, touch, and nostril. The cinnamon-brown, clear water at her feet, gathered from hillside springs to creep in sunless convolutions toward the distant river, reflected familiarly the silhouette of her light-poised figure. Naked cypress knees thrust themselves upward from round, soaked beds of moss and *Mitchella* vines, and intertwined tree-roots made a chain of little islands across the sullen flood. Truth, laughing in sheer delight, commenced the precarious passage. Half-way across she encountered an old friend, a magnolia, growing almost horizontally, with one supporting elbow in the stream. She leaned both arms on it to rest, and fell to caressing a well-remembered group of tree ferns.

Beyond the branch another hill sloped slowly and dimly upward among endless tiers of pine-pillars. Here fell, wafted on counter-currents of air, a new odor, an influence faint as yet, but irresistibly sweet, piercing, and subtle. She gave a little cry; her heart leaped, and her swift feet followed.

The yellow jasmine! She found it in a little clearing of oaklings at the very top of the hill. The trees were leafless yet, but at the tip of every spray grew a swollen red leaf-bud apparently on the point of bursting. Upon the ground between the trees tangled masses of vines writhed and struggled, wiry, purple stems winged at intervals with flame-points of emerald and silver. No blossom crests tossed on these riotous waves, but up the trunk of every tree ran green and purple spirals, which darted, aspiring, to the very tip, and there, audacious, glorious, triumphant, shouted the praises of spring from a thousand golden bugles. The echo of the call was perfume. Truth felt her senses reel with it.

"Oh, I can't reach you! Come down, come down! I must have you."

The flowers bridled and tossed; the yellow sprays tinkled in the sun like a golden fountain.

"Come down!" she cried again. A saucy flower unhooked itself and struck her between the eyes. She laughed as she caught it. "Is this all I'm to have? Then all right!" She turned away singing.

"How clumsy and stupid hot-house flowers are!" she thought. "They are just like stuffed squirrels. I wonder why things get so heavy and helpless when they are cultivated. Just imagine having to smoke off bugs from a wild jasmine vine!" She regarded the flower in her hand with close scrutiny.

"I reckon these seem more real because they grow as nature meant to have them. Somehow it seems almost wicked to over-cultivate flowers, — or people either." The thought of cities choked up in her throat. She tossed it off with a shake of her head. "How I *hate* hot-houses, glass, and gardeners!"

The smile faded from her eyes. She walked abstractedly, with drooping head, until a big blue violet, staring eagerly, caught her attention. She was down beside it in a moment, one finger under the velvet chin, that she might gaze more deeply into the single, mysterious, yellow eye. "Dear little violet," she said in a solemn voice, "if ever you see a gardener coming, you take my advice and just — die! It will save lots of trouble." The violet nodded sagely, and continued nodding, as if talking to itself, long after Truth had passed. The two understood each other perfectly.

But sad thoughts had no power to cling, a day like this. Oh, the joy of being in her woods again! Was ever a sky so blue? No chiselled dome could be more tangible. The fringed openings of pine-branches cut it into irregular shapes; each area might have been a slab of turquoise set in green bronze. The beams of the sun came in sheaves and bands through purple pine-trunks, that were half dissolved in golden mist before they

could touch the earth. Sharp contrasts were eliminated. The luminous solvent crept with the warmth and lull of an elixir into the heart.

Truth wandered inconsequently from point to point, her course making odd little parallelograms and zigzags through the dry, scant grass. Now a wild iris beckoned her, a pointed, azure flame springing from the ashes of last year's growth; now a group of ferns, half-hidden in some tiny cave or dell, about to unroll curled fronds of chrysoprass, hung with loose white filaments, as of forgotten moon-rays. The great bronze welts upon the buckeye she knew for volcanoes of struggling leaves; the dried umbels and racemes of a vanished summer were pledges of beauty and rebirth. The dogwood trees gleamed out ever and again, and always with startling effect. Violets, iris, jasmine, and arbutus abounded. Not an inch of earth but might produce a friend. These, these alone were her kin, her companions; this was true living, this the only life, — to blend one's self with the being of the kind old earth, to lean one's tired head upon her knee, and let the mesmeric fingers of the wind exorcise the circle of the world's troubled phantoms.

She threw herself prone upon the old shawl, but kept her hands and cheek upon the sand. Her eyes closed in a drowsy beatitude of utter irresponsibility. The great, steady magnet of the earth radiated peace. She smiled dreamily as the sun threw over her a thin coverlet of warmth.

For an hour she lay there, neither asleep nor awake, but in the blessing of unreflecting trance, of impression more keen and inclusive for its directness, the consciousness of Nature's primæval races, and, so lying, so dreaming, her human body drifted, as it were, into a world of other dimensions, the plane of things that leaf and bud; her blood ran as cool as the sweet sap along swaying boughs, and, through a stillness as absolute as if her heart had stopped — out of the very hush of finite movement,

— a new and larger rhythm filled gradually the vacuum of her perceptions and she knew herself to be a mere sentient atom, part of the diurnal motion of a great, dumb planet, helplessly secure, transmutably persistent.

In her slow return to a perception of personal identity, Truth Dexter, the individual, dawned as a clear vision from the troubled haze of recent experiences. What had she to do with Craighead, culture, and Boston? It was a pagan soul that lay there, sleepy and strong. A slight movement overhead drew her attention to a squirrel that peered down at her from a pine-branch, with round bright eyes and head tilted daintily. At that moment he was much nearer of kin than the grandmother who waited so anxiously at home.

Truth closed her eyes again, and a drowsy stir of speculation made her wonder whether, in some early incarnation, in a world as yet unpeopled, her spirit might not have been that of a pine tree or a hillside stream, which to-day's loosening of successive sheaves had freed for a last vision of Nature's harmony.

The sun, now directly overhead, caressed her with too fervent kindness. Idly she planted a little weed-stalk upward and noted that it cast no shadow.

"Why, it must be twelve!" she said aloud.

She gave a long sigh that was half a smile, and rose slowly to her feet, looking all the while around upon the forest.

"Yes, I must go," she repeated as if to the trees. "But, oh, how glad I am that I came! It is not lost. I have found it now, forever, and it was, myself. Sometimes it seemed to be lost, but it was only watching for me here!"

She stooped for the shawl and bonnet. Suddenly the old look of anguish darkened her face. Letting them fall she flung her arms impetuously about the nearest pine. "Old pine!" she cried, "did you ever have lightning crash down through your branches, so that you

thought for a while you were dead, and could never grow any more? Well, that is just how I have been feeling! But after a while the first dreadful hurt passes, and you know that you are not dead, — that you are even going to keep on growing. Yes, even if half of you is torn away you must keep on growing with what is left. The birds and squirrels won't laugh at your scars; and after a while, vines will creep up to hide the ugly spaces. Isn't it so, dear tree-friend?"

The tree answered nothing, but that is often the way with a thoughtful listener.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

MRS. DEXTER stood on the veranda steps waiting for Truth's return. At sight of her the pent-up anxiety broke into words:—

"My dear child! Where have you been so long? I began to fear that you were lost."

"Me lost!" cried Truth with a laugh. "Does a bird get lost in the air, or a fish in water? Why, mummie, I've just been findin' myself. But it was selfish to leave you for so long. What have you been doing your first morning?"

Mrs. Dexter did not answer at once. Her face changed into a beautiful sadness, and the smile on her lips deepened. Even before she spoke, Truth knew.

"I went — to *him*!"

"Oh, mummie! Without *me*! I thought we'd go together this afternoon, when the woods were warmer."

"Yes, darling. For the first time without even you."

"Is the place in order?"

"Such beautiful order! Such neatness! Norah has done more than well. But you shall see for yourself, later. The whole quarter is swarming now with friends come to welcome us home. You must speak a few words to them, and tell them that the presents will be here in a day or two. And right after lunch I have promised Uncle Norah that we would go all over the place with him. He has been hanging around since daybreak."

The old lady was more animated than she had been for months. Her eyes shone, and in her cheeks pale tea-roses bloomed.

"Mummie! I'll declare, you are a different woman already! Oh, is n't it *good* to be back home!"

Mrs. Dexter gave a long tremulous sigh of satisfaction, with, Truth vaguely imagined, something of bitterness in it, too.

"But where are the darkies, you say?" cried the younger woman. "I'll go to them at once; but if they expect to see 'Miss Troof' turned into a Boston swell, they'll get a severe shock."

The dusky community was assembled, — all but Uncle Norah. Literally, as Mrs. Dexter had said, he had been, since morning, dressed in the full glory of one of the Colonel's ante-bellum evening outfits, waiting to take the two beloved mistresses over the scene of his care and loving labors. During the months of their absence he had found happiness in the task of restoring the old gardens to something of their former beauty. On every side new fences, smooth-trimmed hedges, and clean-cut gravelled walks gave evidence of good stewardship.

In appearance Uncle Norah strangely suggested a big brown cricket. The color, a rich mahogany brown, was identical; his arms and legs, stiffened by many winters of "mis'ry in de jints," stuck out at entomological angles. Even that time-worn falsetto, his voice, had the cheerful croak that brings to mind fireside dozing, and flickering logs. This analogy went further than externals, for Uncle Norah had kept tame crickets as long as the "Quarter" could remember, housing them under a particularly rusty brick at the corner of his hearth, and feeding them daily with dampened corn-bread. He could never be persuaded to impale one of these insects on a fish-hook, although every one knows that, to fishes, they are more tempting than wood-sawyers, grasshoppers, or the most contortionate of worms.

Once, when rallied on this weakness, he had retorted: "Well! s'posin' I do lak crickets, — what den! My eyes iz my eyes, an' my years my years, — nobody else ain't

axed to lissen! Craickets stays where dey b'longs, an' sings, rain *or* shine. Dey don't gallervant all over creation lak hoppergrasses, an' straddle-bugs, an' yaller niggers. I reckon when de Good Lord comes ter figger up de season-ableness er crickets an' yaller niggers, de crickets gwine ter come out a good many jumps ahead." His assailant was a young and very "lively" yellow girl, and the last remark struck home.

Immediately after the Colonel's death, Truth's marriage, and the removal of "Miss Dolly" to the seashore, the old negro had settled into a state of dejection that bordered on melancholia. He would go about his duties in a dazed, mechanical way, and when at leisure would sit for hours by his hearth, scarcely knowing whether the fire burned or died. As Aunt Big Mary expressed it: —

"Dare's poh ole Unk' Norah settin' humped up by de hyearth, warmin' hisself by a cold soot-hole, an' don't know de diffunce! I don't b'leeve he even feeds dem crickits no mo', and dey all is dyin' togedder, — Unk' Norah fer grief, an' de crickits fer vittals. Ef I did n't drap a corn-pone roun' dare neighborhood onst in a while, I don't know what would happen, no how!"

But when Miss Dolly returned, the old man rallied. Here was a definite responsibility, to look after the beloved mistress, to take, so far as lay in his humble power, the dead Colonel's cares upon himself. Then the large sums that Van began to send him for expenditure upon the homestead, often without Mrs. Dexter's knowledge, aroused a great ambition in his honest heart.

He now sat in a latticed summer-house in the front garden, listening somewhat contemptuously to the clamor of the younger negroes who surged about Miss Troof in the quarter, and peeping now and again through the crevices of lattice-work and rose-vines, to see whether *his* hour of triumph was not about to dawn.

At last it came, — Truth and Mrs. Dexter arm in arm,

each adorned with an old garden hat, and both peering about for the promised cicerone.

In an instant Norah was at the foot of the steps. "Walk down, ladies! Ole Norah's bin on de lookout fer you. You need n't be surgiverous 'bout dat bottom step, now, Miss Troof. A team o' mules could come down hit now, leter lone you an' Miss Dolly! Dis way, pleeze! We'll go roun' de gyardin fust, an' den out throo de back yard."

"We are in your hands, Norah," smiled Mrs. Dexter. "Miss Truth and I have n't dared look at a thing, — have we, Truth?"

"I should say *not*! Why, I even shut my eyes this morning as I went down the lane, and might have broken my neck in that old trash-hole by the gate."

"Now jes' listen at dat!" exclaimed the old man in great delight, — "when dat hole's bin chugged up to de brim fer lo, dese many days, — an' a Blue Gum growin' lak it done sprouted dare!"

As they walked on through the neat pathways Uncle Norah said, with obvious hypocrisy, "I ain't sayin' as how I'se done *much*, Miss Dolly; an' self-praise is half-scan'lous to de world. But I'se wrastled 'round considderbul."

"The improvement is nothing short of magical." protested Mrs. Dexter, with a merry glance at her companion. "I have been quite restless to come out all the morning, but was n't willing to do so without Miss Truth."

"Dat's right, — dat's right! Miss Troof she know ebbery plant an' vine an' flowerin' onion (he meant bulb) on dis place better'n ole Norah hisself. She useter follow me 'roun' when she was n't mo' dan dis high" (he measured off a trembling two feet from the ground). "She used ter say dat de flower-beds was places fer de flowers to sleep in durin' de winter, an' wake up bright an' yearly in de spring."

"I believe I do know them all," laughed Truth. "Look over there, at the bunch of hyacinths,—by the beehouse, just where they belong!" She broke from her companions to kneel beside the flowers. "Precious little darlings! Only a few are open yet, but the rest are crowding up like baby-teeth."

"Jes' lissen at dat! Whot I tell you?" said Norah, turning in great solemnity and implied protest to his mistress. "Miss Troof has n't growed up a bit. She allers has talked to dem yerbs an' flowers lak she thinks dem folks God made."

"And so I do," said Truth, stoutly.

Uncle Norah paused for an exaggerated stare. "You thinks so *yit*!" he murmured. "An' you er rich lady, married to a Yankee gen'l'man!"

Truth laughed, but a tiny cloud flecked her face. They walked on in silence until the arched gateway of the "back yard" was reached. This enclosure was at once a transition and a separation between the front garden proper and a large vegetable field behind. In it fruits, berries, and flowers had once striven madly for supremacy. Strawberry plants had crept, like gaunt red spiders, over the ill-defined walks, unpruned fruit trees, quinces, pears, pomegranate, orange, and fig, had carried the battle high in air, and from the blackberry hedges, long, sword-like "suckers" had menaced the eyesight of the passer-by. At the gate of this garden the two ladies uttered a simultaneous cry of surprise. Instead of the ancient panel of rotting wood, they beheld a surface of shining green paint; in place of the well-remembered peg and string that had once served for fastening, Uncle Norah now rattled meaningly a latch of the newest invention. The old negro was one wrinkled mass of smiles.

"Walk in, ladies! Don' be afraid! Dey's somethin' to come *yit*."

"Why, where are we at!" cried Truth, and Mrs.

Dexter could only hold up her hands in corroborative amazement. "I've never been in this Paradise before. The old fruit trees look like they had just come from the barber. Uncle Norah, you're a magician!"

"And the strawberry beds!" added Mrs. Dexter. "I never saw such beautiful rows. There ought to be some berries very soon, now."

"Dey is! Dey will be!" squeaked Uncle Norah, almost speechless with pride. "No later 'n yistiddy I seen a mocking-bird struttin' up an' down dem rows wid his hands in his pockits, lak he had done hoe'd an' planted de whole shebang. Dat's a sho' sign!"

"Well, judging from the number of flowers there will be enough for us and Brother Mockin' Bird too," remarked Truth. Even as she spoke she paused, and her eyes began to dilate. "I do believe that all the hot-houses are mended," she said breathlessly, and began running. "Do I — can I believe my eyes? Here are all my old geraniums and plants inside. Mummie, come quick! I thought they were all dead long ago."

"No, *mam!*" cried the old man, as he flew over the ground to keep pace with Truth. "Not a one on 'em is dead! All ob dem is safe, — de gerangimums, an' de lumbago (plumbago), an' de *bee-gonias*, an' de night bloomin' serious, down to de Christian-anthems (chrysanthemums), all on 'em is ez chipper ez fleas on er fat poodle. I nussed dem myse'f, cause I seen Miss Troof cryin' when she tole 'em good-bye."

Truth was on the point of crying now.

"But how did you manage to get the houses repaired so neatly, way off here in the woods?" asked Mrs. Dexter, with some curiosity. The question was like honey on the tongue of the old man. "Well," he began importantly, "I ain't a sayin' dat it wus as easy as rollin' off a log, — or even stayin' *on* one. De wood-work didn't amount to shucks, but de glass was sho' survigerous! We hadter git it fum Mungummery, by mejjermint, —

an' I nebber did had no use fer dem tape-worm lines! De fust lot, — hit was too big. De secon' lot, — hit wuz too little. But de third, hit com right enuff, an' a man, wid putty in a pail." It was a peculiarity of Uncle Norah, that he always supplemented his narratives with pantomime. During stages of the present recital the misfitting glass had been indicated by planes of air between two horny palms, — his disgust at the stupidity of glass-dealers in general by a protruding under lip, and Frenchy shrugs of the shoulders; — now he went through the motions of a man carrying a heavy pail. Truth had to cover her mouth now and again, for nothing so insults a negro orator as for his audience to laugh in the wrong place. Mrs. Dexter's face had remained sweet and grave, though deeply interested.

"Well," Uncle Norah continued, "Jes' as we wus puttin' in de las' piece ob glass, an' de chewin'-gum not dry around de aidges, dat fool Sam Turner — *you* know Sam Turner, Miss Troof." Truth put her head on one side, and looked puzzled. "Dat long-bodied, yaller nigger ob Aunt Big Mary's half-sister Bricie Coon's" —

"Oh, Bricie's Sam! Of course I know him!"

"Well, dat same fool nigger, — jes' as we wus liftin' on de las' window-frame, smilin' careful, an' stoopin' over slow (every gesture was faithfully reproduced), what should come up behin' dat nigger but er was'-nes' (wasp), an' set down on his thinnest patch. 'Sted ob composin' himself, lak de Bible says, Sam he up an' screech till you could a heered him de length ob de Tombigbee, dropped the whole window, and went down throo hit, head fust, inter de pit!" Here the narrator stopped to wipe his brow. "I was *dat* mad!" — Words failed him.

Truth broke into peals of laughter. "Poor Sam!"

"Po' Sam!" echoed Uncle Norah indignantly. "S'posin' yo' gerangimums had er bin in dare. Fool Sam, I sez!"

"But he might have cracked his skull."

"Crack Sam Turner's skull, Miss Troof! Now you oughter know better 'n dat. Nothin' dis side ob a mule's hind leg gwineter crack Sam Turner's skull. An'," he added reflectively, "I ain't sayin' dat I would be willin' to put up my Sunday pants even on *dat*. Sence Sam's bin wukkin' in de stable I'se noticed dat both mules has in-growin' toe-nails."

Mrs. Dexter was not listening. She was deliberately taking in the neat beauty of the grounds, and the air of well-being that now hung over everything. A heavy sigh burst from her lips even while she smiled to see the trim fruit-trees, and the geometric rows of vegetables, with borders of rose-bushes and violets. A red-bird darted past the group, and perching himself on the very tip of a bare fig tree, began to sing. Moses, the mule, lifted his shaggy head over a fence, and neighed approvingly; the laughter of piccaninnies came from the direction of the kitchen. Mrs. Dexter turned to her old servant, with eyes that were bright and soft. "You have done well, Noah. I thank you!"

"I lubs de ole place, Miss Dolly."

"I know that, old friend. Only love gives care like this. But there is another place, — a plot of ground, not so large, but dearer" — Her voice broke, and she looked beyond the group, out to a farther hill where, in a little clearing of sentinel pines, the sunshine and the Colonel lay asleep.

Noah's old face began to twitch spasmodically; he made two husky efforts to speak before he broke out, —

"No nigger touched *dat* place! No nigger but ole Norah! De purtiest flowers, de whites' pebbles, de greenes' grass, — dese ole hands toted dem one by one."

"I saw it all, Norah. I know what every pebble has meant to your stiff old limbs. Such work as this, only love can give, and love repay."

She held out her hand. Her face was very beautiful. The old negro took the frail fingers in his, and for a

moment made as if he would bend his lips to it, as he had so often seen Old Marster do. But no! His lips were too coarse and thick for that! He laid the hand back gently, against Mrs. Dexter's sombre skirt.

"Oh, Misses! Misses!" he sobbed. "I ain't nothin' but a no-'count ole black nigger, — but I — I loved him *too!*"

He shuffled away, giving now and again stentorian blasts of emotion on his red bandana pocket-handkerchief. Mrs. Dexter's lips were trembling, but Truth wept openly, with sweet unrestraint, like a little child.

"Dear old black — *angel!*" she sobbed. "I wouldn't give one strand of his woolly head for every Beacon street millionaire in Boston!"

CHAPTER XXVII

SECRETS REVEALED

IF Mrs. Dexter knew that Truth had been in the South for a week without writing to her husband or receiving a letter from him, she did not betray the knowledge. Boston papers had come regularly, various magazines addressed in Norton's hand, and one letter from Mrs. Adams, but none from Craighead.

The post-office of Dexterville was merely one corner of the general "store." The daily mail arrived about five; and it was noticeable how often Truth found occasion to pass, or to visit the store at that hour.

The first enchantment of home-coming was over. The old garden and the forest remained dear indeed, but, after all, there can be but one "first" to anything. Mrs. Dexter had returned to her old routine as a flower to its sheath. Truth began to realize how little Boston and its culture could mean to a soul whose very life sprang from another soil and another age.

"She'll never be happy up North long at a time," thought Truth, and sighed deeply. In another moment she was taking herself to task. "Why am I sighing?" she demanded. "I'm never going back myself, in all probability. This is where I shall be all the rest of my life."

She looked around her as one who has waked in a new, strange place. The old home was the same as ever, but some intangible essence was gone from it, — or from her. The stiff, dark, old-fashioned furniture seemed to mock her, — it was a visible expression of that worn-out past to which she and her grandmother belonged. She

walked languidly to a window to see whether the rain might have stopped. No, it was still coming down in tiny gray parallel strokes, relentless as the deep-cut lines on an engraver's plate. She gave another great sigh.

Mrs. Dexter heard, smiled slyly to herself, and then asked kindly, "What's the matter, dearie?"

"Nothing!" was the comprehensive answer.

The old lady smiled again, and returned placidly to the darning of an embroidered pillow-sham that had made one of her own wedding outfit.

Both ladies had been sitting, most of the morning, in Mrs. Dexter's large, cheerful bedroom. A low fire of pine knots made a presence in the wide chimney-place, and served, as Mrs. Dexter would have expressed it, "to frighten off the chill." This was the room where Mrs. Dexter had lain so desperately ill, where Truth's marriage had taken place. The window through which the rooster had peered stood open now, as then. Truth had tried to occupy herself in a dozen different ways,—sewing, reading, playing on the old jingling piano, helping Aunt Big Mary in the kitchen, beginning letters to Mrs. Adams,—but after each new failure to fix her own interest she would stroll back to where Mrs. Dexter sat. The placid content evident in the elder lady was, for some reason, distinctly irritating to the younger; but anything was better than being off to one's self, thinking. Mrs. Dexter's conversation ran, as usual, in the grooves of long ago.

"Just look at this drawn-work!" she now remarked, holding a bit against the gray light that they both might gaze and admire. "You don't see this kind of work nowadays. Sewing-machines and factories have vulgarized everything."

Truth turned her sombre eyes from the window a moment, but said nothing.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Dexter as if a reply had been

forthcoming, "I would as soon think of wearing a negro's head-handkerchief as a piece of imitation lace; yet everybody seemed to use it in Boston."

"There's the train!" said Truth, irrelevantly, but with more animation than she had yet shown. "I wonder if there's any mail!"

"They wouldn't be apt to send it up from the store such an afternoon," said Mrs. Dexter, tranquilly. "Norah can step down before breakfast in the morning."

"But I want the papers! I think I'll give Nickey two-bits to go after them."

"You will spoil that child. He is not used to tips." smiled Mrs. Dexter, then dismissed the subject from her mind and began to fold away, with elaborate care, the precious bits of mending.

The little negro was despatched, and came back with several magazines and papers.

"No letters?" asked Truth.

"Nome. Not er *one*!"

"Are you sure? Sometimes Mr. Calvert leaves them in the bottom of the bag."

"Sure!" protested Nickey. "I seen him shake de bag top-side down, mysef."

"Well, I'm sorry, but it can't be helped, I reckon. Here's your two-bits."

"I don't want no pay, Miss Troof!" said Nickey, gallantly. "I don't, sho' nuff. Don't gib me dat two-bits!" His voice was sincere, but all the time his little black, claw-like hand was held palm-upward within easy reach of the coveted coin.

Truth laughed as she gave him the prize. "That's all right, Nickey! You earned it."

"No letters, mummie! But here are some Boston papers. Shall I read you the news?"

"Hadn't we better wait till after tea, when things are quieted down? It's on the table now."

"Yes, I s'pose we'd better." assented Truth, doubt-

fully, "though it seems to me that we never do anything down here but eat, and go to bed, and get up again."

Half an hour later tea was at an end, the Big House closed for the night, servants in their own quarters, and Truth was beginning, for the second time, to read the news.

She took up the "Sunday Herald" first. "Big Freeze in Boston. Damage to the Public Garden." She lowered the paper to address her grandmother. "Just listen at that!" she cried triumphantly; "and we about to eat strawberries off our own beds!"

She turned the pages swiftly, skimming as she went. "Fire in Dorchester." "Progress on the Subway. Great Charity Bazaar at Faneuil Hall. Sudden death of prominent Bostonian, — Thomas Courtney Wiley!" The paper and Truth's hands fell together.

"Why, that was an acquaintance of Van's, was n't he?" asked Mrs. Dexter amiably, but without lifting her eyes from her knitting.

Truth tried to reply, but her throat was paralyzed.

Then Mrs. Dexter looked up, gave a little cry, dropped yarn and needles, and hurried to Truth's side.

"Truth! Truth, dear! What is the matter? Are you sick? Did you see any bad news in the paper?"

The open sheet had slid to the floor. Truth's horror-stricken eyes were fastened upon it, and she pointed: —

"That's what I saw. *That!* He'll marry her now! He loves her!"

"Who'll marry who? What do you mean, — are you crazy?"

"It's Van, — Van! Did n't you know he loved Mrs. Wiley? He never loved me! he hates me!"

Mrs. Dexter pressed her hand tightly against her heart. Truth went on wildly: "I was goin' to tell you everything, — I promised him I would, — but I had n't got the courage yet. This changes everything! There is no

hope. I've left him. He's goin' to give me up. And now he'll marry *her*!"

Mrs. Dexter seized both of Truth's frantic hands, and gazed steadily into the tortured face, as she said: "Tell me more slowly, dearie! Mummie cannot understand when you talk so wildly. Do you mean that you are never going back to your husband?"

"Never!" cried Truth, beginning now to sob and shiver. "I can't go back, for he don't want me."

Mrs. Dexter reseated herself. The still invincible spirit mounted to its throne in her ashen face.

"Can you compose yourself enough to tell me about it now? Or would you rather wait until —"

"No, no!" broke in Truth. "We need n't wait. I'll tell you now. I wish I had done it before this (she motioned toward the paper) ever had got here."

"I cannot see how the death of any outsider, even though he be a friend, can affect the relations between a lawfully wedded husband and wife."

"But Van *loves* Mrs. Wiley. He would n't say he did n't."

"Truth Dexter!" said the old lady, with gentle dignity, "remember you are speaking of a married man, — my grandson-in-law, in whom I have every confidence. This woman you mention is scarcely yet a widow."

"But, grandma," said Truth, in more rational tones, "she did n't mind being married; and her — friendship — with Van began long before he knew me. She has been my enemy ever since I landed in Boston. When she was in England I was happy, — that was the only time. I used to pray every night for her not to come back. But she did come, and before long she began persecuting me. Don't you remember that morning when I had been down town to get you some felt slippers, and somebody came into the hotel with me, and afterward you found me with a dreadful headache?"

"Yes, I remember well. I could n't imagine at the time what caused so sudden a turn."

"Well, that was the time she forced herself on me, and said such cruel things."

"What kind of things?"

"Well," said Truth, flushing, "she said that I was makin' myself ridiculous by lovin' Van. That he was a laughin'-stock, too, and that all Boston knew *why* he had married me."

"The heartless trollop!" exclaimed Mrs. Dexter. "But, Truth, I can't understand your listening to such a vulgar mischief-maker."

"Oh, mummie! if you only knew how I tried not to. I put my hands to my ears. I almost turned her from the room, — but she did n't need words. It was all in her face."

"Why did n't you tell me of this at the time? I could have warned you against believing such a baggage."

"I could n't bear to spoil your trip South, mummie. You were so happy! I wanted to keep the torture to myself until you were gone, and then I was goin' to ask some good friend, Mrs. Adams, or Quincy, or Van himself."

Mrs. Dexter almost broke down. "Poor child! To think of you suffering that all alone, — so bravely!"

"But I *was n't* brave, — that's the trouble. It all came out before I wanted it to, that night after the concert."

"Ah! That was the night you fainted!"

"I did n't mean to, really," she said penitently. "It was all my fault, for that night I forced Van into listening when he begged and pleaded with me not to."

"Oh, Truth, did you actually attack your good, kind husband on the words of a minx like that? It was all she wanted, to make trouble between you and Van."

"It was n't only Mrs. Wiley, though that was the stinging part, I reckon. You don't know how bitter she was, — what awful things she insinuated! She was bound to part us if she could, and now she has helped to

do it. Oh, mummie, I've lost him forever, and he'll marry her!"

"Truth Dexter!" cried the old lady in a ringing voice, "no suffering excuses coarseness. I will not stay in the room if you permit yourself such low thoughts. In *my* day decent people did not speak of married men marrying other women."

Truth was taken aback, and a little frightened. "But, grandma," she faltered, "you don't know this wicked world. There are ways —"

"Those ways are not fit subject for decent conversation either. Now, if you have not lost your senses altogether, I would like to know what proof you have that anything the woman said was true."

"He could not deny what I asked him."

Mrs. Dexter caught her breath. "Did you try to force or taunt him into denial?"

"I reckon I did."

"Then he did right to refuse. I have no patience with a man who allows himself to be bullied. Are you willing to tell me what she said?"

Truth hung her head still lower. "She hinted that he had married me for — pique, — and — oh! — the other is too horrible even to *think*!"

"Money?" suggested Mrs. Dexter in a strained thread of a whisper.

"Yes, — and afterward Mrs. Adams admitted the same thing."

Mrs. Dexter struck her frail hands together, and sprang to her feet. "Oh, that money!" she cried, "oh, the curse of it! It killed *him*, — it is eating my heart out day by day, and now is it to ruin my child's life?"

Truth raised her face, and a great light dawned for her. "Do you feel that way, too? Oh, then it will be easier, no matter what happens! Mummie, it was the fortune, after all, that made the issue between us. I said that I would not go on livin' on blood-money. Maybe what *she*

said did something to make me hate it more, — but I had made up my mind before. I have never been satisfied about that will, — only I was too much of a coward to speak.”

Mrs. Dexter stood perfectly silent in the centre of the room. Her tense figure began slowly to relax, her clenched hands to join themselves into the gentle curves of prayer, and into her face came a look of ecstatic brightness. “Now have I seen the glory of the Lord!” she murmured.

A moment after, to Truth’s alarm, she had sunk to her knees and was sobbing aloud, as if in confession, — “Oh, my baby! You are the brave one, and I the coward! Yet I thank Heaven that it has been so. Did you never suspect how the bitterness of this legacy has eaten into my very soul? Everything has been tinged with blood and dishonor, — even here, the improvements on the old place, the very grave in which my husband lies, are tainted. You seemed happy, and I hushed my own sorrow for your sake. I thought that an old woman should not interpose even her own convictions before the bright future of younger lives. I thought you could not feel it as I did. But we will pay it all back! I have learned that heavy, old-fashioned furniture brings high prices in the North. We will manage in some way to live, and clean away the stains!”

“I told him that I would teach,” cried Truth, catching the excitement. “And truly I will. I can’t throw away the education that I have got, but I can use it for our South. I told Van this that night.”

But the mention of Van’s name had shattered the exaltation of Mrs. Dexter’s mood. She rose stiffly, went to the washstand in an adjoining closet, bathed her face, smoothed her hair, and reseated herself in the low rocker beside the lamp. Truth drew near also, taking her place on a little stool at her grandmother’s feet, as she had so often sat with Van.

“Now, dearie, try to tell me quietly just what you said

about this to your husband, and how you left matters with him."

"Well, he was terribly angry, and I reckon I was, too. I told him that I would never be his wife again, and that I was going to make over all the money to him."

"Did he say that he would take it?"

"No, he did n't. He said that he would n't have it, and that it was n't in my power to give it away even to him, without his consent, and that he would be a fool to consent."

"Then what did you say?"

"I told him I would never change on the subject of the money, and he would have to choose between us. Even if I could get over about — Mrs. Wiley, I would never live again on that dreadful money."

Mrs. Dexter leaned forward. "And he hesitated?"

"Yes," said Truth, all the life dying out of her face. "He's hesitatin' yet. He told me to think about it and talk it over with you. And now I wish I had done it sooner, for it's too late!"

"Too late?" echoed Mrs. Dexter.

"Oh, don't you see? He'll take the money now, and his freedom too, for Mrs. Wiley is free!"

Mrs. Dexter gave a sharp exclamation of displeasure, and was beginning, "You must understand, Truth, once and for all, —" when the ghastly pallor of the young face checked her. Truth threw out one hand blindly, clutching the arm of her grandmother's chair, and in a moment more had fallen in a semi-conscious state.

"Oh, what is it, Truth? What is it? Are you sick?"

"No, no!" Truth managed to gasp. "It will be over in a moment. It's only one of those dizzy spells that I have been having lately."

Mrs. Dexter bent to look with an almost agonized earnestness into the drawn face, and noted, as if for the first time, how big the eye-sockets had grown, how pale and sad the mouth. Was there not something unusual, some-

thing special, in that bluish pallor? The old lady caught her breath with a sudden thought.

"Tell me more of this dizziness, Truth. How long have you felt it? At what hour of the day are such attacks likely to come?"

Truth answered obediently but without much alacrity. This sudden interest in physical details seemed to her irrelevant and unimportant. She could not understand, either, why such a light began to glow from Mrs. Dexter's eyes, and started in incredulous wonder as the cry rang out, "Oh, Truthie, my little baby! To think that I have never suspected this before!"

"Suspected what, mummie? I don't understand!"

"There is no need for you to understand yet. Go to bed now and get all the rest you can. I must write to Van. Everything is going to be all right. Van is not going to give you up." The old lady was laughing and crying at the same time. "You'll know before long. Now go to bed, like a good child, and don't you worry one minute longer!"

Truth went upstairs in a dazed condition. "Well!" she ejaculated to herself, "everybody seems to do funny things lately, — even grandma! Now what could have made her so happy all of a sudden?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

ANNUNCIATION

THE next day, as though in atonement for a week of rain, came in warm, windless, and full of sunshine. The long galleries and mossy shingled roofs sent up blue clouds of mist; the ground smoked like a furnace. All the birds of the forest awoke at once. Crows, jay-birds, thrushes, red-birds, yellow-hammers, and mocking-birds chattered in a community of domestic joy, and hopped from limb to limb, carrying in tight-closed beaks small bits of straw and moss, more precious now than the most thrilling of songs.

Truth wondered whether it was the effect of the day or whether indeed her grandmother's morning greeting hinted of tenderness unfelt before. Certainly the minute inquiries about her health were unusual.

During that day no reference was made to the conversation of the previous night, not even when Truth saw a thick letter intrusted to Nickey's care.

Avoidance suited Truth's mood. The agony of mind through which she had passed brought, as reaction, a sort of desperate turning to impersonality. She threw herself into the arms of the day, more than content to wander, unthinking and unremembering, among budding shrubs and springing grass. The warm and perfumed air intoxicated like a drug; realities dissolved with the mists of morning.

The following day shamed the first for brightness. Immediately after breakfast Mrs. Dexter announced her intention of "airing" a certain old trunk while the sunshine lasted. Truth was fascinated by the provocation

in her grandmother's smile. Could it be entirely her own fancy that gave that secretive sparkle to the old lady's eyes, — that quizzical, almost jocose intonation to every spoken word?

Mrs. Dexter, like all good Southern housekeepers, had two great house-cleanings a year. One took place in autumn, in which summer draperies, hall mattings, and linen chair-covers were scrubbed or boiled, according to their kind, after which neat straw casings received them for the winter. Summer garments were "rough-dried" and stored away in "deer-tongue" and chipped cedar wood. Andirons were repolished and set into place; quilts exhumed from scented nooks, winter clothing unpacked, sunned and hung, ready for use, in the big wardrobes. The spring cleaning was, naturally, a reversal of this entire process; but in both the old house underwent a scourge of scrubbing-brushes and yellow soap. Particular care had always attended the order of procedure; so many days were given to "beating," so many to scrubbing, and the last allotted to examining and repacking old trunks. When, therefore, Truth heard the order given to bring from the remotest attic closet the most venerable of all these sarcophagi of memory, she was justified in feeling something more than ordinary surprise.

The old lady bustled upstairs, her keys jangling as she went. Following her appeared the entire household force, — Uncle Norah, Nickey, Poline, the maid, Aunt Big Mary, and, as a recruit, long Sam Turner of the stables.

When at last the heavy box stood in Mrs. Dexter's bedroom, and the servants had vanished, Truth, with an effort at interest, remarked, "What a queer, old-fashioned trunk it is, with that round top, and the brass nails! I don't seem to remember seeing that one before."

"No, it has not been brought down often. It was my wedding-trunk. We thought it very fine in those days."

With the opening of the lid Truth's interest increased.

Across the inside, on the curving top, a procession of fashionable belles of the period appeared, simpering "Amelias" in unbelievable hoop-skirts, and with small ruffled parasols held daintily.

Truth laughed. "Did *you* ever dress like that, grandma?"

"Indeed, I did! I have such a dress and bonnet in this very trunk, the one I was wearing when your grandpa first saw me." A faint flush stole into the withered cheeks. Truth laughed again, teasingly, at which the blush deepened.

The old lady stooped over and began turning up the corners of articles folded in the upper tray. "There's nothing here but old letters and a few Confederate souvenirs. Now help me lift out the till. It's heavy! Carefully, dear!"

In the next "till" lay the dress of which she had spoken, — a pretty silk of cherry color and black, in tiny checks; very small and plain in the waist, but with a skirt like a circus-tent. The bonnet was crushed beyond recognition of a shape. The cherry bows showed streaks of faded yellow.

Something indescribably pathetic lives in old trunks. They are the true lurking-places of memory, the strongholds of the past. Museums and Art Galleries may shelter long lines of classified antiquity, but in a trunk the only method of classification is love. Useless things here are the precious; and the history of a broken heart is often written in a worn-out glove, a tawdry valentine, a little pair of toeless boots.

Truth kept her eyes lowered as the old lady lifted this dress, smoothed its wrinkled folds in silence, and laid it back.

Under the light, shallow tray the main part of the trunk appeared. Truth's attention flew to a large box of green pasteboard, very shiny, and with corners battered to a brown pulp.

"What's in that big green box?" she cried.

"What we're after," said Mrs. Dexter, importantly. "Come, help me lift it on the bed." Mrs. Dexter panted a little, more in excitement, it would seem, than from exertion. "It is for you to open, Truth."

"Me!" said Truth in surprise. She lifted the cover warily, as Pandora might have lifted her box. The odor of camphor and stored years flooded the room. Under a layer of tissue lay the long, white robe of an infant.

"A *baby's* dress!" said Truth in a tone of hushed wonder.

"That is not all. Take it out!"

Underneath spread a white petticoat, embroidered almost to the band, then a yellow flannel shirt, also heavily worked. A little cap came next, a tiny shirt, a jacket of faded pink, and last, a pair of tiny slippers of quilted white silk. Truth's hands trembled until she could scarcely hold the things. A faint embarrassment crept over her. "Why, grandma, you never showed me these before!"

"You might not have appreciated them before," rejoined the other, with a sort of chuckle.

"But whose were they? Why have you kept them so long?"

"This is a christening set. You wore it, and John, your father, before you. Such hand-work cannot be bought *these* days. Just look at that little shirt! It is like spider-webs!"

"Or meshes of moonbeams," said Truth, dreamily. She caressed the exquisite fabric in silence, and then thrust two fingers through the arm-holes. "I wonder why," she said at length, "baby-clothes make you feel so funny, — with a sort of happy ache at your heart!" Mrs. Dexter watched every expression of her face as a chemist watches a changing fluid. Something in the old lady's shining eyes made Truth drop her own. She stooped to return the little garment, and, in doing so, caught sight of an old rattle, a bauble of pearl and

tarnished silver. One of the four bells was broken; the remaining three gave out a stiff, flat tinkle. Truth toyed with it an instant, then threw it to the bed. "It sounds like the laughter of dead children," she said with a shudder.

Mrs. Dexter took it in her hand. "Not dead children, only dead years," she said with gentle reproof. "Our loved ones cannot die, for they live in our hearts. Look, Truth! Your first little teeth were cut on that handle. You can see the scratches yet!"

"I don't like sad, old things," said Truth, petulantly; "I like live, new ones!"

"That is good news," said Mrs. Dexter gravely, in a voice which she strove hard to make natural, "for it is about new ones that I was going to speak this morning. This is only a christening set, you see. All John's other baby-clothes I gave away during the war, and yours, poor child, were not worth preserving. We had lost everything, then. But we've got these as a beginning, and the best thing for us now is to add new ones as fast as we can."

"New ones!" echoed Truth, incredulously. The strange light burned again in her grandmother's eyes. A fit of trembling came, apparently, without cause. "I — don't — know what you — mean — by new ones!" — but even as she spoke the angel's wing touched her.

Mrs. Dexter threw out both arms with a cry. "Oh, my baby! my little Truthie! Have you never guessed?"

Truth stared a moment as one bereft of reason, then fell to her knees. The agony of dread and love and joy was almost too much. The old dizziness swept down, but this time it was with a feeling of physical rapture. She could not meet Mrs. Dexter's eyes for the very poignant sweetness of her shame.

The innocence in which many young girls of the South are still reared would seem incredible to their more advanced Northern sisters. Matrimony is a romantic

mystery, nothing more; and realities which in themselves are pure, being of God's determination, seem to these poor vestals something to be endured in shame and silence. Absurd it may be, and archaic, and, in some sense, cruel; yet something may be said for a system which, in this pragmatic age, can yield the possibility of a new Annunciation.

The two women sat, entwined in a wordless embrace, for many long, blessed minutes. Then Truth put out a shaking hand toward the little robe. With her face bent over its folds she whispered, "Mummie, was *this* why you said things were going to come out right?"

"It was, my precious."

"But," Truth's cheeks burned deeper, "how will he ever know? You could n't —"

"But I *have*!" cried the old lady in triumph. "Of course I worded it in the most delicate way, and was perfectly circumspect in all my phrases, — but *that* was the letter I sent to the station by Nickey yesterday morning. I did n't dare to trust the village post-office; Mr. Calvert is growing so careless."

Truth's face went down into the baby's robe; the red of her cheeks tinged the cambric into a nebulous dawn. "I wish I felt *sure* it would make a difference."

Mrs. Dexter drew the fluffy golden head to her breast as she answered, "We have to trust our Heavenly Father for all great blessings, dear; but I am an old woman and know more of life than you. I do not believe it possible for me to have liked and respected a man who could be heartless enough to desert you after he hears this sweet secret, even if he had been tempted before to think of such a dreadful sin."

"But he was n't going to desert me, grandma. I am the wicked one, for I came away from him!"

Mrs. Dexter's brow grew troubled. "That was a terrible step to take, my child, but you had a noble purpose in taking it. After all, it is merely a misunder-

standing. God is not going to let the malice of a bad woman, or the love of gold come between those whom he has joined."

"But just supposing that He *should*," persisted Truth, "would you think that I had been wicked?"

"That is a hard question. I have always considered marriage the most sacred of human relations, — but, in these strange circumstances, I cannot say I would think you were to blame."

"But still you feel that Van will — be good, don't you?" The entreaty in her eyes was almost unbearable.

"Indeed I do! I feel as sure that all is going to turn out right, as I do that God is just and kind. Now don't worry about it another minute! Fretting is the very worst thing you could do. You must fix your mind on bright and good and noble things. Won't you try to do this, darling, for mummie's sake?"

"I will try," said Truth. "And I know I can succeed. The world is so beautiful that nobody can be really unhappy in it, no matter what happens!"

The two sat together in silence, each with separate, engrossing thoughts; then Truth rose and bore the long, green box in triumph to her room.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LAST GRIN OF THE BUDDHA

CRAIGHEAD'S lonely struggles toward a solution of this unprecedented domestic problem must be passed over lightly. At one moment he felt himself a lion that has been betrayed into a showman's hands, and must maintain an artificial existence of distasteful luxury by going through the antics of a tame poodle; at another an ordinary thief or fortune hunter, who has been caught in the act, and now must either disgorge his booty, or stand in the public stocks.

His strongest feeling against Truth came from what he called her unreasonable, unpardonable, idiotic prejudice. In his heart he knew that Mrs. Dexter would uphold her granddaughter, and so the elder lady, also, came in for a share of disapprobation. "Talk of Puritan narrowness!" he once cried to himself, "this goes ahead of witch-burning and self-torture in one. I wonder why good women have such a devilish longing after self-sacrifice. The present case is Puritanism of the worst type, mixed with a virus of negro superstition. They think the Colonel died because of the money, and are afraid to keep on using it. I'll be well rid of the whole affair!"

In calmer moments the pathetic honesty of the two women stirred him, and he recognized the strange unworldliness of their view. He thought of Truth's determination to teach, that she might not only support herself and her grandmother, but pay back what had been spent in repairs for the Big House. Van could

not forbear a smile. "I must warn old Noah to keep accounts to himself," he muttered.

At no time had the temptation to keep the fortune for himself occurred, though he had thought of more than one plan by which he might seem to yield to Truth, and give up the money, while at the same time he left the bulk of it in a way to be easily regained. The impossibility of this, however, soon made itself apparent to him. Truth might be innocent, but she was no fool. She would inquire into matters for herself.

Again, the blame of the whole situation would be thrown upon Orchid. "If it had n't been for her cursed hints that the beastly money had played a part in my matrimonial affairs, Truth would never have been driven to take this stand. She might have fretted a bit, for a few years to come, but polish and wider experience would have kept her from making an ass of herself. It is n't the Colonel at all, — she only wants to see whether I care for the money or for her, and has n't logic or wisdom enough to recognize that I must, necessarily, put her own interests before mine. Why could n't Orchid have stayed in England!"

More than once, however, such waves of disgust and distaste of the whole problem swept down upon him that he was tempted to solve the riddle by rashness, to write or wire to Truth, "Have your own way," and trust to luck for the future. The game was n't worth the candle. He did not want to give Truth up; people would talk, Orchid plume herself for the rest of her natural life, and, after all, it would be a caddish thing. But the moment in which he should say "I give in," was bitter to contemplate. To most strong men this is the severest of all tests, and Craighead was unusually self-willed. No, it would not be right to Truth should he yield without making at least one powerful effort to convince her of her folly. He had already jotted down many headings for an irresistible and convincing letter that he

was going to write her. The first two sheets lay, indeed, already written, though undated, in the drawer of his "Hanover" desk.

In the very midst of these unpleasant cogitations came the news of Tom Wiley's death. Norton looked a little frightened as he repeated it; his eyes seemed to say, "What's going to happen next?"

Craighead was one of the honorary pall-bearers, and was asked to be present at the reading of the will, on the following afternoon. This was the afternoon of the evening on which Truth had read the announcement in the paper.

At this mournful function Craighead heard that Orchid was left sole heir to the immense fortune, and that he, Craighead, was one of the executors.

Two days later came what he had been dreading most of all, a summons from Orchid herself. "Will you come this evening? I shall be alone from eight to ten. I must see you at once."

There was nothing for it but acquiescence. During the day he kept his mind as much as possible from the coming interview, but Norton and the office boy observed that he was in "the deuce of a temper." He wrote several more pages of his letter to Truth, and the expressions he used were not conciliatory.

A few moments past eight he entered the familiar doorway. James, the footman, once so gorgeous in gold and green, was now a very crow for blackness. This gave a first sharp realization of the changed condition of affairs. James, he fancied, eyed him with suspicion. His voice had a lugubrious croak which matched well his inky livery as he requested the guest to "Henter the draw'n'-room."

It was the same room, however, not changed in a single degree since he and Orchid had fought their last battle of wills. The fat, sleek Buddha dozed in his corner, and incense rose thinly against the gleam of his bare chest.

Orchid came toward Van so quietly that he did not hear her footsteps. She sighed, and he turned with a start. Here was another surprise. Could this be Orchid, — this, the radiant, dazzling creature that had tormented his dreams as well as his waking hours? The woman who now stood passively before him was young, colorless, and pathetic beyond all imagining. Her hair, usually an aureole of glittering strands, was brushed back into sleek smoothness, and wound in a coil low at the back of her neck. The red and gold were faded, and it seemed only a little richer in hue than the brown of an average woman's hair. The long, trailing gown, all of crape, was opened the least bit at the throat, as if for easier drooping of the small, shining head. Her cheeks were absolutely colorless, her lips nearly so, yet there was something in her beauty that Craighead had never seen before, — something that made his heart sink.

Awkwardly he achieved a formal bow and muttered some set words of conventional sympathy.

Orchid ignored them.

"You sent for me?" he began tentatively.

"Yes; will you be seated?" She motioned to a seat near the fire, and placed herself upon a slight black chair of carved teak-wood. Against the dark branches her face was like a forgotten lily among charred stalks.

The gentleness of her mood disarmed Craighead, yet, at the same instant irritated him. It was more threatening than emotion.

"I am entirely at your service," he said, when a considerable pause had elapsed.

"Oh, yes!" She recalled her thoughts with a little nervous catching of the breath. "It was good of you to come. I wanted to say first of all — to tell you — that I had no idea you were to be an executor. I was as much surprised as yourself. Pray do not consider it a service that binds you, — except so far as you would wish it to bind."

"You are most generous, I am sure. But Tom has always been my friend—" He broke off and colored faintly.

Orchid was staring into the fire. Her eyes were big and dark as those of a Southern quadroon.

"Tell me something of—the last; that is, if the subject is not too painful. Did you have no word from him?"

"No, not a word,—not a look. I did not even reach home to see him alive. I had to be sent for,—to a ladies' luncheon. I was dressed in red, laughing, vain, showy, and heartless,—as I always was."

"Now, Orchid," Van remonstrated, "that is pure morbidness! You have nothing whatever to reproach yourself with. Even had you been at home, it would have been useless. He never regained consciousness, after the first blow."

"That is what they *say*. But I can't help fancying that had I been at home—as I never am—*my* voice could have recalled him. You know, he—he—loved me!" She choked, and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Of course he loved you! And for that very reason you ought not to torture yourself with these useless thoughts."

"But you don't know how I miss him!" she said piteously. "I never dreamed it would be this way. It grows worse each hour!"

Craighead did not speak.

She moved restlessly, took her handkerchief from her eyes, and glanced at him for the first time since they had been seated.

"I suppose you are thinking that I deserve it all, that I never appreciated him while alive, and it is a just retribution to miss him now. All the old women will say that. But you know I never made him unhappy. He always believed in me and was proud of my success."

"I neither thought nor could think anything to the contrary," said Van, gravely. "Now, tell me what I can do for you, and — him."

Orchid's little outburst of petulance was already gone. "I don't know, I am sure," she said in a lifeless voice. "I hoped that you could suggest something. I must get away somewhere! It does n't matter where, only away from Boston — and this house! His footsteps are never out of the corridor. I dare not look in a mirror, for fear of seeing his face behind my own!" She glanced over her shoulder at the long pier-glass, and shuddered.

"Yes, you must go!" said Craighead, with decision. "You are utterly morbid."

"Everybody says the same thing," cried his companion, peevishly. "Can't you find anything more original?" Then all at once, to Craighead's dismay, she began to cry, — not violently or with passion, but like a tired child that longs to be comforted.

Craighead shut his teeth close. "Of course it had to come," he was saying to himself. "I was prepared for it. Maybe she does miss poor old Tom, as she says. But why need she try to harrow up my feelings?" He thought of her disloyalty to Truth and was hardened.

"Mrs. Wiley," he began lamely, "believe me, I sympathize with you most deeply in this affliction, and wish to do all that is in my power to help you. Shall I try to think of some quiet retreat where you may go until the first shock of your grief is over?"

Orchid, still sobbing, turned her face from him to lean against the back of her chair.

"Florida?" went on Van, more lamely still. "Southern California? — or even one of the more quiet retreats of Europe?" The bathos of his own tone nauseated him.

Orchid rose and walked to the far end of the room, — to the Buddha's corner, — as if for self-control. When she returned, her cheeks and eyelids had that slight tinge

of pink that we see in the petals of a cyclamen, but there were no other signs of weeping.

"I fear that I have already demanded too much of you," she said coldly. "You are doubtless engrossed in your own affairs, and I have no right to expect special interest in mine. Besides, I might have known you could not understand,—you, whose heart has never ached!"

Craighead looked at her sharply, as one parries a rapier-thrust. She returned the look in calm frankness, but with disappointment in him written plainly on her face.

He felt himself dismissed; and, as is the way with vain man, resented the release.

"I have no desire or intention of shirking my duties as executor," he said stiffly. "Will you not do me the honor of prolonging the interview until we shall have discussed more fully the trip you propose taking?"

Orchid seated herself in silence. Her head was erect now, and the exquisite color in her cheeks a little deeper.

"Had you thought of taking your parents?"

"No! It is a horrible thing to say, but I do not care for either of my parents,—and now, with their black garments and incessant allusions to 'poor, dear Tom,' they remind me of vultures. No, if I go, it must be alone!"

"But surely, a maid —" began Van.

"Oh, that!" she said carelessly. "I suppose so. That is one of the necessary evils."

"Even with a maid, it seems a little unusual, does it not?"

"The commonplace would be unusual for me," said Orchid, with a faint smile.

Another prolonged silence fell upon the room. Craighead had never felt more awkward and ill at ease.

Orchid's eyes were fixed upon the fire. Without removing them her tense figure began to relax, her breath came more softly; she leaned forward, and clasped her

hands loosely upon her knees. How white they were against the crape! At last she began to speak, slowly, as if to herself.

"Europe will be the best. Yes, Europe! One can forget there, where the very streets are ashen with memory. I will pluck those transmuted films of blood, called poppies, from the mould of Cæsar's Palace, and the small green iris that springs, like a laugh, from the living death of Pompeii. My friend, Vesuvius, will welcome me. I always smile to see those grim, determined slopes, — knowing the lake of raging fire within. What a death to die! One plunge into that sea of passion —"

"An old Roman philosopher once tried it, if I am not mistaken," interposed Van. "His toga caught on a rock, and he hung in mid-air until some passer-by plucked him off."

Orchid went on as though he had not spoken.

"And from Italy I would drift into the East: Egypt, with its yellow sands, and hard, blue sky; India; Ceylon, which is the cradle of a mighty creed; then to that great sleepy prophecy, China; and to Japan, the home of artists and flowers. Do you remember how we have talked of Japan and her future, Van? But it is no progressive land that I would seek, — not now, at least. I want the real East, the mystic East, where crystals of thought are hid, and that great silence which underlies all harmony. It is to these places that I shall go, Van. And — I must go alone!" Her wonderful voice sank as a wind that dies above a harp.

It was Craighead's turn to move restlessly. Common-places would be blasphemous. She rose and stood beside him. "Yes, I shall go," she repeated, "and then you can say, 'She is gone out of my life at last. She will never disturb my peace again.' Shall you be glad?"

"I presume I shall," said Van, with a heavy sigh. Then, with a quick change of tone, "Why were you so cruel to my poor Truth, — and so treacherous to me?"

Orchid smiled into his eyes as she answered, "A woman who loves as I love will do anything!"

Craighead sprang to his feet in a revulsion of feeling, but with every vein in his body tingling. "Orchid, Orchid! Think what you have just been saying of Tom!"

"That was true, — yet this is truer. The love is a circle; the grief for Tom, a dot!" Suddenly she threw both hands to her head, in the vehement gesture he remembered, — "Oh, it is *freedom* to suffer!" she cried passionately. "It is rapture to be able to grieve openly! Tom has spent his life heaping me with kindnesses; he never did me a greater one than this. Yes, you look shocked — but my words convince and compel. You have heard of the newspaper funny-man who wrote jokes while his only child lay in the next room — dying. I have been living jokes in society in the same way ever since your marriage. What I have suffered might set a new scale for a Calvinistic hell! By the way," she added sharply, "I hear your wife is in the South again. Is it true?"

"Yes; she is in the South, tortured and heart-broken by the cruel things you said to her."

"She is not the only one who has known torture."

"My wife may never come back," said Craighead, slowly. He had not intended to speak the words; they came of themselves.

Orchid turned breathlessly. "Do you mean it? Was *I* the cause? Oh, I don't know what to say! Tell me, is it true?"

"You were not the sole cause," Craighead answered in the same reluctant, enforced way. "You merely hastened the crisis. The ostensible issue was based on the question of her uncle's will."

"Why, — did n't you put the money in her name?"

"She wishes to throw it over altogether, and gives me the choice between herself and the fortune."

Orchid turned her face away, and for some moments appeared to be struggling with conflicting thoughts.

"Do you really mean to say that she wants to relinquish her entire fortune? What reason does she give? Is she demented?"

"Most people will think so," said Craighead, gloomily, in answer to the last question. "But she is sane enough, and utterly convinced that her standpoint is the only one."

"But what *can* be her standpoint? I never heard of anything so preposterous — unless — yes — it must be! — that she is trying to subjugate and humiliate you. It is a piece of colossal vanity!"

"On the contrary, it is a matter of principle, and arises from the fact that her great-uncle, whose fortune it was, fought against the South. She calls it 'blood-money.' The whole thing is utterly preposterous, I'll admit, but she is absolutely honest in her view."

"Where have been her scruples during the past year?"

"She has endeavored to reason herself out of them, she says; but a point has now been reached where she can endure it no longer."

"And she did n't attempt to force an issue until after her talk with me?"

"No."

Orchid's face had been steadily growing more keen, and shrewd, and hard. She gave a contemptuous laugh, and burst out:—

"Van Craighead, — are you a lawyer to be taken in with such puerile artifice as this? It is pique, I tell you, — nothing else! She is not even sincere. It is a trial, — a test, — a — *punishment*."

Craighead flushed angrily. "The money is her loss."

"What does she care for money in comparison with the sweet satisfaction of humbling you! Probably she prefers her half-civilized, vegetable existence in the South, and would drag you to it if she could. *You* — who ought

to be an Emperor!" She gloated upon him with eyes that swam in adoration.

Craighead's nostrils quivered. "You underestimate her nobility and her strength, Mrs. Wiley."

"There your folly, not my madness, speaks! Oh, Van, this is a crisis in your life, — in all our lives! Do not delude yourself now, when delusion is so fearfully fatal! You have always been clear of sight before. I tell you I know her real motives. It takes a woman to understand a woman!"

Craighead turned on her. "You are fond of analyzing the motives of others. Are you sure of your own?"

"I am," said Orchid, steadily. "If I saw my humblest acquaintance nodding over a charcoal pot, I would try to draw him away. And you — *you* — Oh! For the world's sake, if not my own, I must save you from this mental asphyxiation. There is no height to which you cannot aspire. The President's chair could be your footstool. You should make empires, create universes, — fire the dusty heaps of the past with a glow that will light the remotest corners of the world's future! No one knows your power as I, and — now," she threw out both hands with a dramatic gesture, "am I to stand by helpless, and see you — *punished*?"

Craighead's face was like wax. A fearful power of concentration burned in his dark eyes. "You goad well, Orchid. But a few trifling aspects are still to be taken into consideration, — honor, for instance; faith to two helpless women, and that less tangible essence — self-respect."

"Does a tame poodle need self-respect?" she said bitterly.

The insolence of the tone, rather than the words, came like the lash of a whip across Craighead's face, but the pain steadied him. On each temple stood out a rough "V" of purple veins. He felt them as burning scars. The ghastly pallor deepened.

"Let us be clear, then. You, in my place, would feel justified in accepting freedom and fortune from that young girl, not yet twenty years of age, without a scruple or qualm as to the effect on her future life?"

"A stone in a king's path must be kicked aside. It is free to gather moss elsewhere! Perhaps the chivalrous Quincy —"

He stopped her with a gesture. "Leave something to decency!" he said darkly. "We will keep to the main issue, if you please. Now, taking for granted that I have acted on your advice, that I am legally free, and that technicalities could be managed, — that you have lost no confidence in me or respect for me, — would it then be your desire to become Truth's successor?"

The question came so unexpectedly that Orchid's breath was taken away. She gasped and stared as though in doubt of her senses; then she let her eyes fall, and a slow, painful blush suffused her throat and brow.

"Why — what do you mean?" she stammered. "What has that to do with it?"

"Everything! On this one point may hang life and death. You have assured me many times that you cared for me as you could never care for another man. You have said it again to-night. You cannot pretend concern for conventionalities. I ask you, now, Orchid, the direct question, — should I agree to accept the freedom that might be mine for the taking, would you pledge yourself both by words and in writing to marry me as soon as I might desire? Answer me, Orchid! Don't blench and cower! Where is your superb vehemence of a moment ago? It must be yes or no."

"You have no right to force a decision at such a time!" she cried. "It is unworthy of you, — cruel! —"

"Is it 'No'?"

"Certainly not! Give me time to think!"

"That is the one thing I will not give. Is it 'Yes'?"

"It is *not*!" she exclaimed with a flash of defiance. "I will not be bullied!"

Craighead gave a hoarse, unnatural laugh, and threw one palm to his forehead. For a moment it seemed that he was about to break into sobs. "God! But the edge of the axe was cold! What a risk! How did I take it!"

Orchid fell listlessly into a chair. She knew that she had failed, with success at her very feet, — yet, had she really wished success? Craighead stood by the mantel, ejaculating, and talking to himself like a madman. Orchid regained self-control slowly, and, wrapping herself in the tattered fragments of her self-esteem as the tragedy-queen of a tenth-rate company in her tarnished cloak, said haughtily: —

"Am I to infer that I have been again an object of vivisection? Experiment seems to be your forte."

"This is the most terrific I have ever passed through," said Craighead, wiping his brow. "Thank God, you failed in the test!"

"Refusal to be bullied is not failure."

"It is so far as I am concerned. One tests a metal while the fire is hot. Twice I have tested you, and twice you have failed. In both cases my part has been an enforced and contemptible one; and I thank Heaven more for your sake than my own that you have failed."

Orchid's next remark was a surprise. "I don't know but that it *is* a good deal more comfortable to have these fireworks over once for all. Dodging sticks isn't pleasant. Suppose we change the subject."

Craighead seated himself. "Orchid," he said solemnly, "I feel like a toper who has signed the temperance pledge in a nightmare, and wakes to find himself reformed, and his whiskey-soaked rags turned to fringe and spangles. I could walk a tight-rope down the length of Commonwealth Avenue!" This being the only known effort on Van's part to be humorous, it is worthy of record.

But Orchid did not smile or reply. She was staring

moodily into the fire. "Shall I tell you something?" she said, after a long pause.

"If you please."

"You are not half so unworldly and high-minded as you think. The whole matter with you is that you love your wife! I knew it at Ponkatuck last summer, though at that time you had no suspicion of the truth."

"Thanks! Now, shall I tell you something?"

"As you please."

"You are not half so worldly and recklessly romantic as you think. That letter which you showed me on the beach at Ponkatuck last summer was *not* the one you sent to Dexterville."

"Now how did you know that?" said Orchid.

"I suspected it from the first, but was n't certain until to-night."

"I congratulate you on your new state of enlightenment. The one I sent to Dexterville was far more flip-pant, and did n't contain a word of love. The second was concocted for a special purpose."

"You are clever beyond belief."

"Would you like to see the first?"

"No. Burn it! Let us have done with all hypocrisies! Your better self is coming in on the home-stretch after this, and I shall be the first to throw up my hat."

"If you had ever really cared for me, my better self might seem a little tame." Her tone was wistful.

"Come, now, Orchid! Be honest! You never really cared for me, either. It was simply that I was out of reach, and you did n't want another woman to get ahead of you."

"Perhaps it was. Yet I *do* think that you could make almost anything out of yourself under the proper conditions."

"Ah, Cassandra, you don't know me if you think that the conditions could include treacherous desertion of

those two women! Apart from Truth, I am sincerely attached to Mrs. Dexter."

"Then you will go back and — submit?"

"I shall go back and — submit."

Orchid sighed. "I can see you in my mind's eye, ambling toward a contented old age of slippers and sweetened mush; shedding your ideals with your hair, and waxing eloquent only on the virtues of your eldest-born."

Craighead laughed. "Surely that is better than shambling along the filthy lanes of political preferment."

"Perhaps so," said Orchid, with a shrug, "if it were a necessity for you to 'shamble.' I had pictured you flying. One does not like to think of an eagle in a henhouse."

"Oh, I guess I can sun myself on the top of the coop once in a while," rejoined her companion. Both were silent for quite a space; then Craighead said, —

"Orchid, do you feel that it would be impossible for you ever to be friends with Truth?"

Orchid started at the question. "Yes, utterly impossible! I could never endure that solemn stare of hers. It is like looking into the eyes of a child, and I was always deathly afraid of children. Parental joy is not in my line!"

"You will marry again, some day."

"Probably, but not in Boston. I am beginning to loathe the place! And as for this room —" She broke off with gestures of disgust.

"The room is exactly like its mistress, Orchid, — brilliant, beautiful, and unrestful."

"I think I hate the Buddha most of all," she went on, petulantly. "Look at him now, with his sleek body and oily grin! If only he would make faces, or open those pulpy eyelids the millionth part of an inch, or — give a twiddle to his thumbs, I could endure him! But that maddening grin! Well, it is his last. He goes to the auction-rooms to-morrow."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I am going to sell out everything. I have given all my gowns to my maid, with the threat that should she wear one of them in my presence, it means instant dismissal."

Craighead rose to his feet. "What a break-up for you, to be sure! You can't let all the past go without a pang. Neither can I," he sighed. "I must be going. It is very late. How shall we say 'good-bye,' Orchid?"

She rose also, and coming close to him, suddenly laid her head against his arm. "Oh, Van," she said piteously, "I am so tired of everything,—myself most of all! Maybe I have cared for you more than either of us knows. You will be happy—and—forget, but I shall never be happy!"

He took both her hands in his; the motion withdrew his arm. "If you are not happy, no one is to blame but yourself," he said kindly. "You have more than any woman I know,—wealth, youth, beauty, talent, charm—"

"Oh, yes," she broke in. "I say all those to myself, but I might as well be repeating 'x, y, and z.' The equation is lacking. I can't really be anything, not even a villain, though I have tried. Will you say to your wife that I regret my cruelty?"

Van gave a tender, surprised smile. "Orchid!"

She shivered slightly and turned her face away. "Never mind all that! It does n't atone for much."

"It atones for everything!" cried he. "I always knew you had fine instincts. You have given me a happy memory to carry away."

"Go, then, before I mar it! This is 'good-bye,' indeed."

"Good-bye! and *bon-voyage*, should I not see you again. I may be called away within a few days."

She held him by the hands, drawing him slightly toward her, and gazing with mysterious intentness into his eyes. "Good-bye! Don't you dare to pity me! It is true that I never really cared."

She heard him pass into the outer hall, and go slowly down the steps. She leaned forward, listening intently for the sound of his footsteps on the hard pavement. They came, clear, firm, and regular as the marching of a soldier. She drew breath quickly, threw her head back, and walked over to the Buddha. "You grinning horror!" she whispered, and struck it violently on the mouth.

James came running in at the sound of the crash. "Oh! the hidol! the hidol!" he cried. "Now 'ow in creashun could he 'a' wobbled hisself offer that table?"

"He smiled himself into an attack of vertigo," explained Orchid, gravely, and then, to the horror of James, went off into peals of laughter. "No, don't put him back on the pedestal; take him out into the stable, or the kitchen, or anywhere where I shall never see him again!"

"'Is nose is most flattened into 'is skull," said James, reproachfully.

"That will add fifty dollars to his antiquity."

James tenderly lifted the fallen idol, and bore him from the room. At sight of the smirking, flat face over the footman's shoulder, Orchid went into new paroxysms of mirth.

James deposited the image on the kitchen table unmindful of ejaculations from the cook. He mopped his brow with a large, black-bordered handkerchief, and muttered loudly, "I don't like the looks of it, — I *say*, I don't like the looks of it!"

"God knows, ye ain't the only one!" said the cook, grimly. "What in land's sake do you bring the grinnin' 'eathen into my kitchen for, I'd be pleased to know?"

"I don't like the looks of it!" repeated James. "'Take 'im into the kitchen,' she says, 'or the stables,' she says, 'or anywhere where I'll not clap eyes on 'im agiu,' she says; and then goes hoff into shriekin' 'isterics!"

Orchid's maid entered in time to hear this remark.

"*I'm* not took aback at anything, now," she volun-

teered. "These 'swells,' as they calls theyselves, are all of a piece, — half-cracked, *I* call 'em!"

Meanwhile Orchid, in the drawing-room, had crept into the chair so lately occupied by Van, and was crying herself to sleep.

Craighead hurried up Beacon Street in the direction of the Hanover, looking about as he went for a telegraph office. All the small ones were closed for the night. He boarded a late car and went down into the city again, preferring not to send a domestic message through any of the hotels or apartment houses in a neighborhood where he was well known. He went to the main office of the Parker House, and despatched the following: "Have decided as you wish. Shall I come? Van."

The long distance back to the Hanover was taken on foot. He was glad of the exercise, the cold night air, the March wind. The sky was very clear, and stars winked and blinked in flocks. He looked up toward them thinking of a characteristic speech that Truth once had made. "Do you call those hard little things *stars*?" she had cried. "They make me think of Jew's eyes over a bargain-counter. They are not even kin to those soft, glorious lights of ours in the South." To Van, now, they seemed hard, and cold, and keen. Other phenomena than stars were becoming illuminated by Truth's original points of view.

He felt a sudden longing to see Truth, and his heart warmed too toward Orchid. "She is a superb little woman," he said to himself, of the latter. "I believe the good in her will triumph in the end, but even at her best she would have worn me to a nervous thread. Truth is the sort of wife I need. Poor little Orchid! I wonder whether she ever did really care for me?"

Entering his suite at the Hanover, he stumbled over a thick letter that had been thrust, with difficulty, under

the door. An instinct told him that it was from Truth, and he felt a twinge of disappointment upon recognizing Mrs. Dexter's thin handwriting.

As the letter seemed to be unusually long, he decided to make himself comfortable in slippers and smoking-jacket before reading it. He smiled, thinking of what Orchid had said of slippers. A cigar lighted, the lamp adjusted, and his big easy-chair drawn up at the right angle, Craighead prepared to read.

As he reached the full significance of Mrs. Dexter's vaguely delicate and often ambiguous sentences, he gave a low cry, sprang from his chair, and began pacing the floor. In a moment, however, the letter was resumed.

He read the last word, and refolded the letter with a strange smile. Then he leaned over to one of the desk drawers, drew out the half-finished communication to Truth, and began tearing it into shreds. Truth's Paris photograph seemed to nod at him from the desk. But something else was needed, — what was it? Suddenly the thought came. From a small secret drawer he took another photograph, this time the face that he called "Jeanne d'Arc." He held it under the light until the shaking of his hands blurred the sweet outlines. Then he placed it upright against a pile of books, still in the full light, and stared on, silently.

Was there ever a sweeter face? — one more noble, or pure? She was only a child yet, and to think — to think —! What must she have suffered all those days! Craighead thanked God that he had not been more impatient. A tiny rainbow came between him and the picture. He knew it for a tear upon his lashes. Brushing it away, he leaned nearer, and said aloud, "Little girl! I was not going to give you up, even without — this!"

CHAPTER XXX

CONCLUSION

Six months had passed. On the gray walls of Trinity Church ivy had again changed from emerald to bronze; and the elm trees on the Common again bore sparrows in lieu of leaves.

In the South, the country roadsides blazed with golden-rod and purple iron-weed; the great forest about the Big House had entered upon that iridescent drowsiness which heralds winter sleep. Blossoms had fallen and fruit was being stored, — yet Craighead had not seen his young wife face to face.

In answer to the telegram sent so long before, she had returned the message: "Thank you with all my heart. We are very happy. But do not come; wait for my letter."

What a letter that had been! Gratitude, pride, humility, passion, shyness, love, — all emotions of which a proud, sweet, unspoiled woman could be capable, crowded, like luminous flowers, into the garden of that single cry.

"My whole lifetime will be too short to prove my love," she wrote. "Perhaps if I had a thousand lives, each melted into a single day and each filled to overflowing with love for you, it would do for a beginning. Oh, but I shall be so good! So careful of your wishes! I don't believe I can ever have another sad thought. But now I am ashamed, for, even while thanking you for your glorious nobility, I am going to ask you still another favor. It will seem a strange one to you, I fear, but it is very real to me. I want you to let me stay in the South quietly, just with grandma, until — Octo-

ber. I know that we Southern girls are brought up in foolish reticence and modesty, but the feeling is in my blood and bones, and I cannot give it up all at once. Oh, you can't imagine how I shrink from seeing any one but grandma,—even with her I am sometimes confused. I should die of shame in meeting even you, my dear, noble husband that I love more than any woman ever loved her husband before. This will not make you doubt my love, I know. This is my strong, earnest wish, almost my prayer; but even in this, if you feel very strongly, I will fight down my feelings, and come back to you in Boston. I cannot help thinking of the heavenly sweetness it would be to meet you for the first time, here,—when I am well and strong again. The fear of losing you has made me see how precious you were. I will do everything as you say."

Craighead frowned as he read this unique proposition, but under the shadow of the frown a smile flashed forth. Truth's Jeanne d'Arc picture was, at this time, never absent from his desk. At this he glanced as he said, aloud, "You are a strange, silly, charming little woman, and I guess you are going to get things about as you want them."

A week later he saw Mrs. Wiley's name on the passenger list of a New York steamer, and knew that she was passing out of his life forever.

Some time after, while writing to Truth on the subject of her uncle's will, he received the following answer: "We rely on your advice in this as in everything. But grandma and I have talked it over a good deal, and we thought, perhaps the best thing would be to build and endow a big Home for veterans of the Civil War, and let both sides be equally welcomed. It might stand on the banks of the Potomac River. I should love to go to it and see that the soldiers had every comfort, and, because I love you so dearly, I shall feel no different to the Northern soldiers from the Southern. We should have

just the same number of each, and I think they would enjoy themselves fighting over old battles in memory. What do you think of this for a plan? Grandma is eager for it, and already talks of putting up unlimited supplies of fig and watermelon-rind preserves this summer, to be used there. Oh, if you could only see grandma now that this nightmare of money is taken from her! Both of us are perfectly, entirely, absolutely happy. I have found that sewing can be more fascinating than the most inspiring lectures. And this is all because of your great nobility."

Van agreed, tentatively, to the plan, but said that it must wait for actual commencement of operation until they could all be together, and work out details. The money was put into the hands of trustees, with income to accumulate for the present. The checks that he now sent Truth were all from his own earnings, and he fell into the way of making a playful statement as to the derivation of each sum. "Enclosed please find a check for a hundred dollars, being payment in full to Van der Weyde Craighead, barrister, from Josiah T. Quail, for services rendered. N.B. The service was rescuing him from a night in jail."

With another fifty dollars he wrote: "Payment in full for the drawing up of a last will and testament of G. Milton Trashbasket; a professional poet, with nothing to leave but pencil ends and rejected MSS."

If Craighead lost, during this interval, in the companionship of his wife, he gained an unlooked-for harvest in her letters. These were all written in her quiet evening hours, her "holy time," as she called it; and came as regularly as the day. In them he was often startled by flashes of rich imagery, insight into the deepest problems of human existence, and, above all, by cleaving expressions of love for himself. The pure, simple home-life of the two women unfolded before him as a new and exquisite species of life. Truth told him of her garden,

her thoughts, and of the books that she and her grandmother took turns in reading aloud as the other sewed. Once in a great while she hinted of the progress she was making on a certain important outfit. "As I sit by the table, writing, the bed beside me is full of little clothes. Each one is a chrysalis woven more of love than visible fibres. Almost every night I take them out this way, so that I can see them all. I am not used to the wonder of them yet, and, often, when I have been gloat-ing over them, half-frightened by the beating of my own heart, I must fall on my knees to kiss each one again, to hold out the unbelievable little sleeves, to thank God, and whisper your dear name. Oh, Van, Van! I pity you for being a man!"

It was, indeed, a time of brooding sweetness in the Big House. The acute sorrow of the Colonel's death had melted into a softer memory. Mrs. Dexter once said to Truth: "I cannot even wish him back again. It is the sunshine of his blessed presence that is over us all. Why should I demand the earthly part? For that dreadful year while we used the money I was afraid to meet him, even in dreams, but now I sleep again, by his side."

One of Craighead's letters written in September deepened in Truth a joy that already, at times, seemed too great to be endured. "While my little wife spins and weaves in her South, it behooves the head of the family to be seeking out a sheltered nook in his colder clime. Shall I be shamed by mocking-birds? In pursuance of this, my plain duty, I have been spending a day looking at houses in Brookline, and have secured the refusal of a charming new cottage, which has not only sufficient ground for a whole Dutch colony of bulbs, and many winding walks for toddling feet, but actually a wellspring of its own, and a tiny birch forest which will please some one I know more than a little. I must give my answer by the end of three days. Shall it be

‘Yes’? or does that some one prefer the grandeur of the Hanover?”

Thus the blessed months slipped by. Magnolia blossoms stood, like ivory chalices upon the enamelled altars of their boughs, then fell away into tarnished petals, leaving spiky burrs from which, in time, oozed seeds like drops of clotted blood to hang, suspended at intervals, from threads of invisible silk. The yellow flowers of the “rattle-box” changed into small, translucent bladders, each loosely filled with black atoms of seed. Along the creekside ripe whortleberries tantalized hungry assemblies of minnows, and on the hills brown “chinkapins” twinkled as brightly as the squirrel’s eyes which sought them out. Harvest time was at hand, and the wood responded to the immemorial cry; in the Big House (itself an adaptation of forest trees), one of God’s creatures waited for her hour of fruition.

At last it came, a fiery Nessus garb of agony, which, being endured, cooled into the white robe of motherhood.

Truth lay on her bed, pale as the last honeysuckles that crowded at her window, and more sweet. The physician was long gone, and the siege of pain forgotten in the first mother’s ecstatic cry, “I have gotten a man from the Lord!”

Aunt Big Mary, being celebrated for skill and knowledge in such crises, had been transferred from kitchen to sick-room, and now sat, small in person but imposing in dignity, by the low fire of pine-knots. A greenish concoction in a small “granite” saucepan simmered on the hearth, and gave out a pleasant odor of herbs, which mingled in natural affinity with other prevalent and characteristic smells, — soap, damp flannel, and violet-powder. Truth’s eyes had been carefully shielded from the fire, but they did not need external light. They were fixed, as it were, upon some vision of rapture dawn-

ing for her alone ; a heavenly smile was set on her lips, and she seemed to listen to music. Indeed, any intent ear could have heard the same sound, a weak, thin, irregular breathing that rose from a cocoon of white flannel close against her arm. What a sound is that ! Not all the trumpeting of earth's victorious armies is more mighty, or the song of dying violets more sweet ! The first cry may torture and tear the heart with memories of a thousand vanished pangs of motherhood, but the rhythm of the sweet, consenting sleep that follows, — that is the true music of the spheres !

Mrs. Dexter entered on tip-toe, closing the door with painful care. Unsoftened by the precaution Big Mary frowned, and lifted a threatening and bird-like hand. Her beady eyes expressed a question. Mrs. Dexter must have understood, for she nodded.

The nurse stooped for one more stir to her concoction on the hearth, then walked toward the bed, Mrs. Dexter following meekly, and stood scowling importantly upon her charges.

"How is you now, Miss Troof?" she demanded, with a sort of suppressed ferocity that would have daunted the uninitiated.

"I never felt better in my life!" said Truth. "I am dying to take him down into the garden this *minute* and show him to the roses!"

The cocoon stirred, groaned, and then sneezed, as if in indignation. "Bress his heart!" cried the nurse, her stately manner melting like wax before that sound, "*did* dey talk about takin' hit into de cold world, an' hit skeercely rested fum Heaven? Nebber min'! Hit's mammy will look atter her lamb!" She turned the bundle over to the other side, Truth watching the operation with a distressed frown. "I ain't calkerlatin' ter have one side er his head like a climbin'-squash an' de yother like a hive o' bees, ef you an' Miss Dolly *is*!" she said indignantly, in answer to the frown.

Mrs. Dexter waited to hear no more, but stole, laughing, from the room.

Aunt Big Mary, still grumbling, caught up a bit of flannel here, a brush there, as if in anticipation of a guest; but before Truth had time to wonder the door opened again, and the tall figure of a man came slowly into the firelight.

The old woman put a hand on Truth's chest. "Now, honey! fer God's sake —!"

Truth flung her off. "It is Van!" she cried in a voice that burst through the shadows like a star.

She heard one great sob, Aunt Big Mary sped from the room, and Van was kneeling by the bed, weeping out his heart on his young wife's pillow.

An hour later, when the baby had been soothed and apologized to for the unwarranted disturbance, Van was allowed to come in again, this time escorted in state by Mrs. Dexter.

"Is n't he just the beautifullest thing you ever saw?" asked Truth, warily elongating the tiny aperture at the exposed end of the cocoon.

"I have n't had a good look yet," responded Van, evasively.

"Why, here, — you can see him perfectly! There's his whole face, nose, eyes, mouth and all!"

"I presume that — er — button — *may* become a nose some day!"

"You sha'n't see him another minute!" said Truth indignantly, and brought the edges of the shawl together.

"Good God! You gwineter *smother* my chile!" shrieked Aunt Big Mary. "Miss Troof, you ain't got no mo' notion er takin' keer o' dat baby dan a jay-bird has o' pickin' his teeth!"

"But, Van," began Truth, when the disturbance was quelled and the nurse pacified, "how on earth did you get here? How did you — know?" Her pale face became crimson.

"He's been in Montgomery a week!" cried Mrs. Dexter, before Van could answer.

"And *such* a week!" groaned Van. "I read enough magazines and trashy novels to soften the brains of Solon, not to mention the strain on my nerves."

"Oh," said Truth in a low voice, "and you were *that* near!" Her pretty confusion deepened.

Van laughed, and a moment after drew from his pocket several yellow envelopes. "Do you care to hear your congratulations, Mrs. Craighead?"

"Congratulations!" echoed Truth. "Who could send them? Does anybody else know?"

"Why, of course! What do you expect? A man can't keep news like this all to himself. There would be danger of bursting!"

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Truth, and lay back on her pillow, quite exhausted. Mrs. Dexter crept to the bedside, and held Truth's hand while the messages were being read.

"Here's the first," said Van. "'Drat the boy! How's Truth?'"

"Father!" exclaimed Truth. "Isn't it exactly like him? That one does n't need a signature."

"None of them do, I fancy," remarked Van. "Here's the second, 'Rah-rah-rah-Harvard! Remember that I am godfather! How is Truth?'"

"Quin!" cried Truth with shining eyes.

"Now who sent this one? 'God bless Truth and her boy! How is the little mother?'"

"My dear, dear Mrs. Adams!" whispered Truth, her eyes filling with tears.

The little group fell into silence. Only the baby's irregular breathing marked off the sweet, flying moments. The sound of a distant whippoorwill, twice repeated, came faintly, like the echo of a vanishing regret.

Mrs. Dexter roused herself with a start. "Night is coming in! You have had too much excitement for one

day, already, my darling. Now we must leave you and the little one to Aunt Mary."

"Oh, just one moment!" pleaded Truth. "Just one, — alone with Van."

Mrs. Dexter looked appealingly toward the nurse. The old woman nodded grim assent, and followed her mistress from the room. The two stood, whispering together in low tones, just without the door.

Mrs. Dexter did not look into Van's face as he came out, but before she knew it he had flung both arms about her, without a word, and was straining her against his breast.

"My son!" she whispered, "my own, dear son!"

Night came down over the Big House, and darkness was everywhere except in the wide, softly shaded room where slept Truth and the cocoon.

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